In a recent feature for the Daily Mirror, Rod McPhee produced a ‘Have you broken through the class ceiling?’ quiz that might assist those poor creatures clearly living in the misty-eyed, maudlin cloud-cuckoo land of a modern-day Citizen Smith, the risible, beret-wearing 1970s sitcom ‘urban guerilla’ from Tooting, whose determination to emulate his hero Che Guevara is ever thwarted by unwelcome encounters with the real world.¹

‘Millions of Britons are proudly working class …. or are they?’ McPhee asked, his short questionnaire helpfully accompanied by photos of typical representatives of the British class system: ‘Downton toff the Earl of Grantham, social climber Hyacinth Bouquet and working class hero Jim Royle’. With similarly cartoonish logic, the ensuing questions suggested that class might now be measured by a mixture of hard economic realities and trivial, stereotyped cultural predilections, the expected questions about wealth and qualifications being accompanied by more facetious ones about whether one (it is always ‘one’) goes to the ballet or takes an interest in ‘cricket, tennis and polo’. Those imagining they are still working class might be in for a surprise, the piece implied. Take that beret off, have a shave, throw out that Rab C Nesbitt vest and drop those cringeworthy Cockney vowel shifts; you’re now proudly middle class.

The genesis of McPhee’s tabloidised take on social stratification was, however, more scientific than its jolly tone might seem — and perhaps also more ideological. A short preamble glossed a recent survey that found ‘60% of [British people] think of ourselves as fully fledged torchbearers for the blue-collar brigade’, before adding, ‘when actually there
are more middle class members than ever before”. Without expanding on this latter claim, it continued in baffled tones: ‘In fact, even after 30 years of huge social change, the way we view ourselves hasn’t altered since 1983’. The durability of such notions of social class – in a seemingly irrational, incorrigible refusal of what great swathes of column inches ought to have told us – suggests a popular British tendency toward the nostalgic and anachronistic, which the Daily Mirror might now arrest: ‘But do we really know where we stand on the social scale? Take our quick class test to find out …’

If McPhee’s questions, however, bore little sociological merit, he was tapping in to a confounding disparity between discrete, subjective, or even communal, perceptions and discursive, mediated projections ‘from above’ — between how class is lived as a reality for the multitudes and depicted as an object of endless fascination in the media and popular culture. In particular, those who transcend humble roots through meteoric social climbing – whether that of the questionably talented interloper (Jade Goody, Katie Price), or the merited rags-to-riches grafter (Alan Sugar, Oprah Winfrey) – have become a motif for our age, personifications of a zeitgeist supposedly defined by things like social mobility, freedom of expression and meritocracy. When attendant claims about the decline of the old, Marxist class model as a legitimate tool of social analysis are widely circulated – and pseudo-scientifically verified by the likes of the recent BBC Great British Class Survey – those who cling to categories like ‘working class’ would seem to be living in the past.2

This was precisely the inference drawn by tabloids from the September 2013 results mentioned in McPhee’s feature. ‘Middle class? Not us: 60% say they are working class… the same as 1983’ was the Daily Mail’s similar take on the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, which stressed also how 60 per cent of Britons ‘insist on describing themselves as working class’ (my emphasis), the same proportion that said they were working class when the first of these surveys was taken in 1983.3 For The Telegraph this was the ‘Riddle of the vanishing – and reappearing – British working class’, who, ‘sixteen years after John Prescott – now Lord Prescott – declared “we are all middle class now” […] still like to think of themselves as “working class” – even if they are not’.4 Indeed, those of a right-wing hue might have been equally dismayed by other recent survey findings on how little the regressing British working class has learned, with a majority of Britons in favour rail renationalisation in two 2012 surveys (Daily Express/Vision Critical and GfK NOP), following on another survey from 2009 (PhoneBus) that revealed strong support for renationalising utilities.5

The more recent BSA report had stated that ‘although Britain has become a majority white-collar society, subjectively it is still inclined to feel working class, albeit perhaps not as closely as it once did’.6 There is an interesting interplay of assumptions here between the BSA and the Mail. On the one hand, we are implicitly being told to consider ‘white-collar’ jobs as middle-class jobs: a call-centre worker living in a bedsit and earning less than a tradesman, is, by rising ‘above’ manual work, no longer working class. On the other hand, we are also informed that old class categories have been obliterated by acquisition; if you own a good deal more than your parents, you’re not in the same social class. By this logic, having an indoor toilet, or earning twice as much in 1920 as the average worker earned in 1890, might have made workers of that era newly middle class; but neither history nor class are static things. Class must always be contextualised and theorised in terms of the actual lived conditions and relative
inequalities of a given time and place, while also accounting for a broad continuity of experience that inheres in the long narrative of life under capitalism. EP Thompson indeed cautioned against such ‘a static view of class’, for class denotes ‘a relationship, not a thing’.7

Interestingly – whatever about their journalists – the people who market tabloid advertising are acutely aware of this reality, schooled as they are in the relentlessly categorising logic of market segmentation, of ‘ABC1s’ (lower middle, middle and upper class) and ‘C2DEs’ (skilled working, working and ‘lower’ class), for whom products and services must be clearly differentiated. If the Mirror or Mail surmise, editorially, that the public’s sense of class is outmoded, their profiles for Newworks marketing suggest otherwise;

with the Mirror having a roughly 60 per cent C2DE readership and the Mail a predictably higher 65 per cent ABC1s, it would suggest that both papers are acutely aware of the interrelationship between class, economics and taste.8 Despite the evident durability of such a (commercially important) understanding of class amongst the newspaper’s pin-striped backroom boys, and, more importantly, in the public domain (as reflected by BPA results), there is a telling disjointedness between how most people see class, how it plays out socially and economically, and how it is constructed and deconstructed through discourse.

Class and Contemporary British Culture

Interrogating that disconnect is one of the core ambitions of Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn’s comprehensive and challenging new book, Class and Contemporary British Culture (CCBC; Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013). An intellectual tour de force boasting of a rare combination of theoretical rigour and page-turning clarity, it sets out to answer key questions about the appearance and reality of class in modern British life. Over eight chapters, Biressi and Nunn explore the dynamics of celebrity culture, the rarefied realm of upper-class affluence, and the flights-of-fancy of media myths, reality TV and middle-class fears, developing thought-provoking and engaging encounters with some of the less examined commonplaces of classism in modern British society; for the Irish reader, there are many obvious parallels that suggest how utterly enmeshed in Anglo-American popular culture our own largely second-hand frames of social and cultural representation have become.

Such frames – the nuts and bolts of discursive power – inform the kinds of perceptions of class already alluded to here, and in societies with such influential mass media, perception is often as important as substance, or, as cultural materialism would argue, a form of ‘substance’ in itself. Such media-driven perception was highlighted, for example, in July this year, when an Ipsos Mori study for the Royal Statistical Society and King’s College London illustrated the pervasiveness of right-wing media myth-making, which has particular applicability to how working-class people are viewed.

The study revealed the average perception that £24 in every £100 spent on benefits is fraudulently claimed, whereas in reality this figure is estimated at £0.70 in every £100. 29 per cent of people think that the British exchequer spends more on jobseekers’ allowance than pensions, whereas in fact pensions spending is 15 times that of jobseekers’ allowance (£4.9billion: £74.2billion). And, perhaps most revealing of all, average British public perception thinks that 15 per cent of girls under 16 get pregnant, when in reality the figure is 0.6 per cent.

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deterioration of civic spirit as indicated by voting levels. The tendency to associate ‘scrounging’, benefit fraud, the breakdown of civic values, and teenage pregnancy with working-class communities (as illustrated in Owen Jones’s Chavs: the Demonisation of the Working Class, 2011, or Tracy Shildrick et al.’s Poverty and insecurity: life in low-pay, no-pay Britain, 2012) of course means that these perceptions have particular effects in terms of how people from those communities are ‘wounded’ by the markers of class and its ‘hidden injuries’, to borrow a term from Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb. 9

Getting to how these hidden injuries are produced and circulated in popular culture is often a more difficult and, of necessity, speculative task than the work of economics or sociology, but Biressi and Nunn show how nonetheless rewarding such a task can be. Part of their initial undertaking is to suggest how modern popular culture was shaped by the very material developments of the post-Thatcher era, and in particular how the 1980s spurred an individualism and atomisation of British society in which ‘already-foundering traditional class structures and class-based affiliations finally broke down’: ‘in scholarly terms, within sociology, cultural studies and cognate fields, this was also the period in which the utility of class-based cultural analysis was being increasingly questioned and challenged’. 10 Typified by that (ironic, of course) mid-eighties anthem of the upwardly mobile, the Pet Shop Boys’ ‘Opportunities (let’s make lots of money)’, mocked by Harry Enfield’s caricature of the brash, nouveau riche, loudmouth Tory plasterer, Loadsamoney, and dramatised by Caryl Churchill’s satirical play Serious Money (1987), the era of alleged opportunity and social mobility ushered in by Thatcherism left a lasting mark on the structure of Britain. Biressi and Nunn describe how these years were dominated by a conjuncture of economic neoliberalism (Thatcher, Reagan and the Chicago School) and ideological revolution, accompanied by ‘the dissemination of certain values as well as practices, including those of self-improvement, individual responsibility and personal investment, as exemplified in the practice of home-ownership and the privatisation of national industries’ (CCBC, 8). Such values resulted in a new marginalisation of working-class life, new polarisation and precariousness in things like habitation and work practices; with the change in housing priorities came also an intensification of ghetto living (the best council houses were sold, while those renting were increasingly concentrated in areas of intensified social neglect), and with the new mood of consumerism came an increasing concentration on less dependable and ‘feminised’ service industry jobs ‘based on flexibility, impermanence, outsourcing, casualisation’ (CCBC, 11). As the authors of CCBC argue, the recent spectacular collapse of this ‘thirty-year experiment’ (CCBC, 11) has not yielded to a surge of socialism in government, but rather a new phase of neoliberal values ‘where austerity discourses are deployed to marshal, harness and legitimise certain kinds of conduct and attitudes and to marginalise others’ (CCBC, 12). While glaring class inequality remains, a culture that legitimates such inequality masks the seams in this ideological and economic patchwork of unsustainable practices and values. Biressi and Nunn proceed to explore some instances of how this concealment is sustained.

As they rightly argue, ‘in spite of scepticism on the part of some scholars about the continuing value of reading culture in class terms, in British culture, media and political discourse and in everyday parlance class and class labels continue to exert their hold’ (CCBC, 17). Chapter 2 charts the rise of a particularly pervasive (and pernicious) set of class stereotypes harnessed to the image of ‘Essex Man’ and ‘Essex Girl’, which have facilitated new, often erroneous narratives of social change. Enfield’s Loadsamoney – ‘an emblem of new
money’ and ‘aggressive entrepreneurialism’ –
is instances the former; Essex Girl is ‘the monstrous
figure of consumption’, the subject of frequently
‘aggressive and misogynistic’ humour, disparaged as
a kind of ‘female “chav”’ (CCBC,24). But if both
figures are regularly the subject of ridicule, they also
become ‘a key motif for a far larger story of social
transformation with attendant classed anxieties
about politics, place, taste and social mobility’. Part
of this story is the flight of the newly affluent from
working-class areas of London, and also their
increasing embrace of Tory values – the kind of
thing witnessed more recently in Ireland with
formerly working-class, now right-leaning new
suburbanites who bought shares in Eircom and
fuelled the housing boom, or ‘Decklanders’ as
David McWilliams dubbed them.

In Britain, this ‘cockney
diaspora’ (CCBC,26) began
to increasingly
imagine – and act
out – an alliance
with the wealthy
based on a new
cult of aspiration.
A modicum of
mobility – allied to
a great deal of
rhetoric about
advancement – encouraged the moderately well off
to imagine they might be on the way to becoming
the extremely well off, hence their support for Tory
policies that largely benefitted the very rich; ‘in post-
Thatcher Britain people would calculate their tax
obligations not on what they earn but on what “they
hope, desire or aspire to earn”’. This (for most
people unrealistic) aspiration is key. The spiralling
cost of Premiership football players, which might
not have been tolerated a generation earlier,
suddenly became the subject of excitement and
voyeuristic pleasure. Again, one might recall the
spontaneous and sustained applause that
accompanied Pat Kenny’s announcement on
RTÉ1’s Late Late show of Denis O’Brien’s Esat sale
windfall; if the Republic was a latecomer to the
Essex Man mentality, it nonetheless took to it with
equal gusto. As Justine McCarthy wrote at the time,
there was evidence of a ‘striking difference in the
culture of the marketplace today compared to the
’80s’, exhibited by ‘the sense of goodwill that
marked […] O’Brien’s vast windfall with the sale of
Esat’, but evident also in the dismissal of those who
might object to the adulation of the moneyocracy of
O’Briens, McEvaddys, Quinns and Desmonds. In
recent Irish politics, indulgers in such (socialist)
obstinacy are guilty of ‘the politics of envy’.

Like those more recent brash stereotypes of
the culturally deficient but financially rolling-in-it
Irish – ‘White Van Man’ and ‘Breakfast Roll Man’
in England the arriviste Essex Thatcherite
signalled not only that ‘for the first time in
generations, it was good to be greedy’ (Moore and
Moore, cited in CCBC,35), but also a certain unease in
middle-class society about
those now living next door
and driving a Merc. Yet
the broader effect of such
trivial but ubiquitous
imagery of vulgar mobility
is to posit the myth of
meritocracy while
implicitly dismissing those
who are not on-the-up,
lionising

That such an environment served to sever
the upwardly mobile working class away
from the less affluent working class – and
served, more importantly, to create an
imagined alliance with the mega-wealthy
that little served their own interests –
reveals a great deal about how easily, for
instance, the Irish public could accept the
enormity of their bailout of equally mega-
wealthy bondholders.’

going-somewhere individuals
who could only succeed by leaving their slower,
less successful, less fortunate peers behind.

There is a brutish, bold “get out of my way
because I’m worth it” bravado attached to these
figures which appears to disconnect them from
their classed, collective moorings in the service
of individual success (CCBC,43).

The widespread acceptance of the Gordon Gekko
adage that ‘greed is good’ has a subtext that says
poverty (as a pathology) is bad. That such an
environment served to sever the upwardly mobile
working class away from the less affluent working
class – and served, more importantly, to create an
imagined alliance with the mega-wealthy that little
served their own interests – reveals a great deal
about how easily, for instance, the Irish public could
accept the enormity of their bailout of equally mega-
wealthy bondholders. Here, such imagined communities had that quality of ‘horizontal comradeship’ Benedict Anderson associated with nationalism, or, as the bankers themselves put it, the ‘green jersey’ agenda.14

While Biressi and Nunn provide excellent discussions of the demonisation of the ‘revolting underclass’ in Chapter 3, and the culture of educational inequality in Chapter 4 (anyone who watched the RTÉ’s recent X-Factorised ‘The Scholarship’, or Channel 4’s ‘Too Poor for Posh School’, will enjoy this), their explanation for how the rich have managed to command such sway in the culture of late capitalism takes off in Chapters 5 and 6. The first of these examines ‘the ones who got away’: that staple trope of modern myth-making, the much-trumpeted rags-to-riches celebrities who act ‘as paradigms of social mobility’, and who play a vital role in ‘the social production of knowledge and help nourish a consensus about the possibilities for social mobility and escape from an often difficult or constricting early life’ (CCBC, 94). Biressi and Nunn survey the range of celebrity autobiographies in order to extrapolate ‘common vectors of social mapping’ that track the invariable trajectory from poverty to plenty. These, they argue, tend to cling to the contours of a curiously common mode of emplotment, which ‘may include the subject’s self-identification as a classed individual, a sometimes painful altertness to social difference and the charting of effort, aspiration and achievement finally leading to success’ (CCBC, 96). Far from turning anguished social experiences of class inequality into any sort of countervailing social analysis, these stories instead tend to turn the trauma inwards, underlining, ‘in one way or another, [the celebrity’s] difference or uniqueness as individuals’, their special capacity to

jump over socio-economic hurdles, thus suggesting the merit of their subsequent success. Those good enough will break through, the story goes.

Enlisting sociological analysis from the 1940s onwards, Biressi and Nunn trace a ‘decline in popular interest in biographies which connected people’s personal lives to history and to the forces of production and of work and a growing curiosity about celebrities’ private lives, consumer practices and leisure’ (CCBC, 97). There is, of course, a profoundly disabling depoliticisation in this process; no longer are we to question how people act in historical and social contexts, how they grapple with moral dilemmas or great events, but rather the individual must be romanticised and glamorised, their emotional journeys privileged above that of the world about them — poverty or inequality the broad brush strokes of a mere backdrop to the more important, more fundamental narrative of ‘you can get it if you try’. In fact, not only is this kind of narrative a favourite of publishers of celebrity biographies, but, increasingly, a necessity in the everyday production of celebrity:

‘No longer are we to question how people act in historical and social contexts, how they grapple with moral dilemmas or great events, but rather the individual must be romanticised and glamorised, their emotional journeys privileged above that of the world about them — poverty or inequality the broad brush strokes of a mere backdrop to the more important, more fundamental narrative of “you can get it if you try”.’

the ideal winner of, say, Any Dream Will Do (BBC1 2007) or Pop Idol (ITV 2001-03) or Operatunity (C4 2003) is someone whose story is one of evident social mobility despite their modest (read ‘poor’ or more often “working-class” or “ordinary”) origins (CCBC, 100).

As our authors note, not only is this kind of story ‘an unhelpful distraction […] specifically for working-class children, who turn away from more serious and viable ambitions’ (CCBC, 101), it further reinforces patently absurd ideas of British society as a meritocratic place where talent inevitably rises to the top. Biressi and Nunn identify a host of celeb-
culture programmes that invariably promote this concept, and Irish society has increasingly followed suit, with indigenous versions of *The Secret Millionaire* and *Dragons’ Den*, all of which conjure a society where those who try hard make it. Indeed, as Pat Stacey recently lamented, ‘you couldn’t turn on your television without encountering some entrepreneurial blowhard boasting about how they’d hauled themselves by their bootstraps to the summit of Mount Capitalism’, a tangible measure of which being that ‘Dragon’ Seán Gallagher ‘came within a whisker of being President of Ireland’.15

The celebrity ‘emphasis on the self and the transformation of the self’ thus ‘deflects attention away from bigger collective stories of survival from material deprivation, class or race prejudice and the disadvantages with which this is associated’ (*CCBC*, 108); instead of perhaps focusing on the many sociologically sound reports that tell us, for instance, that Ireland has the lowest educational mobility in Europe along with Greece (i.e. if your father was a tradesman, you’re unlikely to get to third-level education), we are unrelentingly bombarded by counterfactual media messages that tell us ‘you can make it if you try’.16 The uptake on this neoliberal trend in recent years has been instructive, *The Scholarship* (*RTÉ*), *The Apprentice* (*TV3*), and *Fergal Quinn’s Retail Therapy* (*RTÉ*) being further examples that all, in their different ways, tell us the same thing as Joan Burton’s JobBridge programme for the unemployed: it’s not social and economic structures that create things like poverty, recession or long-term unemployment — it’s you. As Biressi and Nunn point, celebrity culture tends to tell us that ‘the limitations of social class are firmly behind us’; in such a world, ‘positive thinking’ is often ‘presented as the key to success and its inverse (failure) is therefore inevitably inscribed to personal deficiencies in this regard’ (*CCBC*, 113, 115). As Richard Hoggart once observed, ‘the corollary of successful “personalisation” is constant and considerable simplification’.17 Individuated non-explanations of social phenomena trump rather more scientific things like the superabundance of data on how the poor are kept poor.

**The Condition of the Working Class**

One piece of cultural production that challenges such discourses is Mike Wayne and Deirdre O’Neill’s recent, gripping documentary *The Condition of the Working Class* (*TCWC*; Inside Films 2013), which explores a project embarked upon by The Ragged Collective, a working-class theatre group in Manchester. The film follow the group’s deliberations over how they might update Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845) for a modern audience, using forum/community theatre methods and experiences from their own lives.

What emerges is an outpouring of ‘class injuries’, an array of resonant and enduring life experiences that bring the rhetoric of class politics down from its ideological perch to the more accessible level of the experiential. As one theatre workshop director, Sergio Amigo, puts it in the film, ‘theatre is a political act — even when they stage a big musical, by showing the musical they are silencing other things’, and in *TCWC* the point is very much to show those ‘other things’, as cast members re-live often wounding experiences for the stage.

Lorraine Eckersly, in her fifties, produces a series of sketches that recall her academic promise, her youthful desire to be a doctor, and how her class position thwarted both; she recalls also other children at her ‘posh’ school mocking her working-class background — her saying ‘terra’ instead of ‘goodbye’ — an experience that resonates with scholarly research, such as Ramond Hickey’s study of Irish ‘Dartspeak’ and British ‘Estuary English’,
which shows how accent is used as a psycho-social method of distancing and undermining working-class subjects.\textsuperscript{18} Younger actresses Faye Hall and Rosie Woods recall similar experiences of being ostracised at university and acting auditions because of their northern, working-class tones.

Natasha Atkinson talks about her fish-out-of-water experience in a grammar school, being singled out by teachers for coming from a council estate, while Ray Eckersley recalls the feeling of dread that accompanied Margaret Thatcher’s election in 1979, when managers in his company waited with gleeful mien at the factory doors the following morning, exclaiming ‘watch your backs — it’s our turn now’. Other actors recount similar experiences, but perhaps the most perturbing is that of JD, a young female actor, who tells of sexual harassment in a dead-end job she needed in order to keep paying bills: ‘I literally only did it because if I didn’t I wouldn’t have any food’. Like the other troupe members, she found her entrapment reflected in Engels’ 186-year-old analysis: ‘If I hadn’t been in the position I was in because of the class I was in […] I could have walked out’. One of the important points made in Biessi and Nunn’s book is echoed in another actor, Jenny Loudon’s contention that ‘the only people making decisions about what working-class people are, are people who don’t have any experience of working-class life’. The Condition of the Working Class, like Class and Contemporary British Culture, is part of a counter-hegemonic drive in scholarly and cultural production that is sorely needed in Britain’s increasingly elite, Eton and Oxbridge dominated media and political sphere. There are lessons here too for the Irish Left.

\footnotesize

1 Rod McPhee, ‘Have you broken through the class ceiling’, Daily Mirror, 10 September 2013, 15.