Nathalie Olah

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*How to win the culture wars in an age of austerity

Repeater

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Published by Repeater Books
An imprint of Watkins Media Ltd

Unit 11Shepperton House
89-93 Shepperton Road
London
N1 3DF
United Kingdom
www.repeaterbooks.com
A Repeater Books paperback original 2019
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Distributed in the United States by Random House, Inc., New York.

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Cover design: Johnny Bull
Typography and typesetting: Frederik Jehle
Typefaces: Meriden LT Std, Bodoni URW, Gill Sans, Times New Roman

ISBN: 9781912248568
Ebook ISBN: 9781912248575

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Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd

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Introduction*

On 18 December 2018, forty-three-year-old Hungarian national Gyula Remes died in an underpass attached to Westminster tube station in London. He was days away from starting a new job that could have paved the way to a more secure and stable life. Westminster station has become a popular spot with the city's homeless population thanks to its warmth, emerging as an all-too-vivid symbol of the UK's inequality due to its proximity to Parliament where, for over a decade, Conservative MPs have overseen a programme of damaging austerity, causing a 24% increase in homeless fatalities.[1]

A day later in that same building, Opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn called Prime Minister Theresa May either a "stupid woman" or "stupid person", depending on the account, under his breath in response to a remark about the possible outcome of a no-deal Brexit. The media maelstrom that soon encircled the story prompted Corbyn to hit back, issuing a video segment in which he referenced Gyula's death — not as a decoy, but to highlight the disproportionate amount of attention paid to a momentary slip in parliamentary decorum, compared with the social issues whose dire effects were now being demonstrated only a short walk from Parliament. In response, the Labour Party received endless accusations by social media users, including members of the establishment media, of tastelessly exploiting a man's death for political advantage, as well as facetious remarks from publications in reference to the fact that they *had, in fact,* given coverage to Gyula's death, while failing to heed the main point about proportion and emphasis.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. In February 2018, a similar cacophony surrounded the death of another homeless man at Westminster station, leading to reprisals for those who sought to raise awareness of the issue. It begged the question, then: when is a good time to mention the deaths of people on the streets of one of the richest countries on Earth, and who gets to decide? What's more, when is an appropriate time to discuss the media's skewed priorities, if not during the midst of a PR circus surrounding one fairly tame and innocuous parliamentary gaffe?

To those watching carefully, it was clear that a perverse logic reigned, one that was driven by a fanatical obsession with good manners, delivery and PR nous. Its strange rules dictated that the word "stupid" was more offensive than the rising levels of poverty, homelessness and other forms of degradation that had prompted its utterance. Meanwhile, for decades, we'd heard "good taste", "pragmatism", "sensibleness", "civility", "respectability" and "decency" used *ad nauseum* to justify policies whose real-world effects amounted to widespread suffering and harm — including hastening the onset of cataclysmic climate change — while also being used as a line of impenetrable defence against any outside criticism. We had grown used to a politics that favoured style over substance, in which politicians frequently stretched the truth and avoided answering difficult questions. But in addition to this was a far less easily detectable, but no less profound, shift in dialogue and reasoning. One that, on the grounds of taste and decorum, eliminated the possibility for meaningful debate or critical engagement on the issues affecting people's lives. Being divorced from any ideology or principle, the vague terms used to justify the political agenda had been endlessly redefined to reflect the interests of those in charge, and any challenge dismissed offhand on the grounds of *poor taste*, a *lack of decorum* or the *excessive politicisation* of issues that in actual fact were nothing if not political. As a result, those in power had effectively wrapped themselves in an armour of rhetoric, protecting them from any real reproach.

In this complex semantic knot, in which the truth was often shrouded and sentiments confused, the only recourse for those seeking to challenge the establishment seemed to be either irony or victimhood, and neither would prove particularly effective in mounting any kind of real alternative. All this had happened thanks to a slow and steady corruption of our language, the origins of which can be traced back to the politics of the 1980s, where an ethical vacuum had been created by neoliberalism — once a distinct ideology (or non-ideology, as many have been keen to point out), but which has since been steadily transposed onto every part of modern life. Neoliberalism advocates for the disentanglement of the free market from the state, minimising the possibility for any policy or ideology to override the free-market principles of competition and profit-making. But, as Mark Fisher points out in *Capitalist Realism*, neoliberalism came to shape far more than just straightforward economics, creating a culture which by extension favoured popularity above quality, spin above principle, and rhetoric above ideas. There's a reason why *The Emperor's New Clothes* has become a somewhat trite analogy for so much that has been created in the past few decades, as under the auspices of neoliberalism a new cultural economy emerged, whose sole metric was purchase. In this climate, ideas and truths came second to marketing, and marketing increasingly came to belie a vast and meaningless void.

In this sense, neoliberalism doesn't advocate a manipulation of the facts *per se*, but at its core is an assumption that honesty and principle are obsolete. The real success of Thatcher, Reagan and their acolytes was not just in imposing neoliberalism as an economic agenda, but in making it the *modus operandi* of the entire Western world, to the extent that it would shape our attitudes, behaviours and modes of communication. These are the circumstances by which the smokescreen politics of our current era has come to be: a politics that relies on the languages and styles of managerialism, under whose slick delivery an agenda of rampant, unabated capitalism could be passed off as the ointment for all of society's ills. It is a style of politics as divorced from the lived experience of the majority as it is from the markets that Thatcher and Reagan had so famously freed; as a result, politicians, spin-doctors and advisors have been allowed to enter into a purely academic exercise of seeking to win electoral majorities based on rhetoric alone.

Under this elaborate web of marketing, the electorate was often left blind to the right-wing agenda that was being ushered in — or, to use Stuart Hall's phrase, "the great moving right show" that had taken place since the late 1970s, which saw a shift in the Overton Window so far to the right as to make the left and its overarching ideas seem unthinkable. There is no greater testament to this phenomenon than the existence of Tony Blair himself, whose flagship project New Labour represented a temporary end to the labour movement. But his success, and the success of the neoliberal project in more recent years, has also depended on a failing media, one that has neglected to document this phenomenon and, instead of policing those in power, increasingly served as the primary arbiter of these pernicious rules of taste whose final objective is always the preservation of elite power structures and the neoliberal agenda.

In the ten years since I began working in journalism and publishing, I have watched as the number of books, films, TV shows and records entering the public consciousness that truly challenge or interrogate our rules of taste has dwindled to almost none. I have watched as, in a society where the "Like" looms large, pleasing the liberal media types with the most online and high-society standing has become the primary concern of publishers, broadcasters, record labels, editors and the many other gatekeepers of our collective culture. As a result, we have arrived at a cultural climate unfit for challenging the status quo and, by extension, meeting the demands of a society suffering under the dire effects of austerity and the faulty political and economic system that has produced it.

Part of this has been driven by the shift towards an online culture, but it has also been driven by the media's internalisation of market values — once a necessity reluctantly navigated for survival, now, increasingly, a subconscious factor in editorial, commissioning and hiring policies. Of its many harmful effects, a lack of working-class participation and storytelling has become one of the most obvious and widely contested. According to a study in April 2018 conducted by Create London in conjunction with sociologists from the University of Edinburgh and the University of Sheffield, only 18.2% of people working in music and performing and visual arts grew up in a working-class household. In publishing it's a pitiful 12.6%, and in film, TV and radio only 12.4%.[2] Though the authors found that the odds of working-class people being hired by the creative industries had remained largely unchanged since the 1970s, its output had nevertheless become far more monocultural and limited to the upper-middle-class experience. What's more, this inequality had never felt so stark and hypocritical given how the media was being increasingly narrated as a force of openness and social mobility.[3]

This limited scope of experience that informs the vast majority of our mainstream culture results in expression that is not only unrepresentative, but critically speaking also far more predictable, safe and unchanging. I'm hardly the first person to make this point and I won't be the last, but it bears repeating that the fairly identikit trajectory of today's editors, publishers, gallery owners and curators — through private school and elite further education establishments — doesn't exactly lend itself to a diverse, innovative or particularly challenging outlook. To put it plainly, those at the helm of the media in its current guise — and I refer to media in the broadest sense, inclusive of art, music, literature and film — lack the vested interest required to challenge the vast web of edifice, hollow managerialism and corporate double-speak created under capitalist realism. In fact, much of their schooling has been directed towards helping them to prosper within that very system. What's more, in the risk-averse climate of a world post-2008, any meaningful attempt to tell stories that challenge or invite criticism of the cultural milieu in which the media and its satellites broadly sit has also vanished. Where the elitist media of the past might have once taken chances on a wider range of talent — commissioning work by, and for, working-class people — it has increasingly shifted its focus towards the safe and dependable middle-class consumer base. As such, the risk-aversion that took a hold in the 2010s was essentially classist in character.

In making this charge, I'm sure there have been times in the past when I seemed petty, but as I started to appreciate just how divorced working-class people were from the formal disciplines governing their fate, and how impossible it has been to make any meaningful arguments in favour of working-class communities, I also began to appreciate how complicit and partially to blame our cultural institutions were as well. I have often been met with a defensive list of exceptions — people who were able to succeed in spite of their working-class credentials — yet this false reasoning sadly only serves to reinforce my point. Every grime artist now proudly touted by the mainstream media as evidence of greater working-class participation is not only far rarer than their overwhelmingly middle-class peers, and was not only required to work ten times harder to achieve the same ends, but also stands on the shoulders of a great many who were failed by an elitist and heavily biased record industry and media. Grime succeeded in spite of these forces, and for that reason its main proponents deserve no shortage of praise. But we must not allow an otherwise highly elitist media to use their efforts as false proof of its own inclusive credentials.

What's more, the small efforts the media has made to redress these accusations of bias have so far fallen far short of producing any meaningful change. Without a view to overhauling the rules of taste governing its output, a minority of working-class hires within a system whose executive branch still maintains an overwhelming majority of wealthy and largely privately-educated people and serves their interests, constitutes an act of extreme tokenism. This is the performative duty of an industry with absolutely no intention of changing. And yet, without a mainstream outlet for the legitimate anger felt by those people at the sharp end of right-wing policy, the polarization driving our current culture wars looks only set to intensify. In this sense, the censorship of working-class anger represents one of the final obstacles to reawakening socialist feeling at the scale needed to achieve electoral success, and I believe any socialist movement with an emphasis on positively transforming society must also contain a large-scale cultural component too.

Much has been made of Tony Blair's use of popular culture in this way to bring New Labour to power in 1997, piggy-backing on Britpop and Cool Britannia. But arguably more significant was the fact that, since the signing of the Beatles to Parlophone in the 1960s, pop culture had made incrementally greater concessions to working-class storytelling and working-class voices — even if this wasn't necessarily reflected in more proportional hiring practices. These artists and performers would make a mockery of not just the old-school aristocratic elite, but also the consumerist lifestyles endorsed by Reagan and Thatcher. By the mid-1990s there was a shame attached to being upper class and/or excessively concerned with money-making — the baddies and clowns of that era being almost exclusively cut from the Reaganite and Thatcherite cloth. In the UK, between Steve Coogan and Caroline Aherne, Antoine de Caunes on *Eurotrash*, and the writers of *Spitting Image*, there were few figureheads of the right whose dignity remained intact by the time of Tony Blair's 1997 election campaign. A host of Harry Enfield characters, Hyacinth Bucket in *Keeping Up Appearances*, and the characters of *The Brittas Empire* ridiculed the consumer anxieties of the upwardly mobile, whilst in America, characters such as Carlton Banks in the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, Howard Cunningham in *Happy Days*, Mr. Burns and Ned Flanders in *The Simpsons*, and later Lucile Bluth in *Arrested Development*, would serve much the same purpose.

But by the 2010s that tradition would start to be eroded. In fashion, the likes of Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood would start to be replaced by an army of blue-blooded, blonde-haired aristos. In comedy, shows that played on the indignance of working-class people towards their bosses would be steadily replaced by a self-parodying brand of middle-class humour, peddled by floppy-haired men with Home Counties accents. In art, the lineage of working-class eccentrics ranging from David Hockney through to the YBAs would slowly be replaced by an army of public-school graduates whose currency was erudition and obscurity. While in pop music, the insurgent working-class voices that had arguably defined the genre would be increasingly replaced by the likes of Ed Sheeran, Florence and the Machine, and Mumford & Sons. While these acts were no less privileged than bands such as the Rolling Stones or Blur who had gone before them, they were under less duress to conceal their privilege, creating music that was squarely set within the upper-middle-class experience. Yes, there would be exceptions, and the phenomenal inroads made by grime and UK hip-hop can’t be ignored, but their perpetual exception has arguably served as a decoy for a media whose inequalities were in fact only becoming more entrenched.

In the grand scheme of austerity, these cultural factors might not seem like the most pressing concern, but optics count, and given the role of culture in reflecting back our collective values, diversity of output is paramount. Efforts to improve standards have similarly hinged on the protected characteristics of employment law — age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation — while frequently neglecting to consider the one condition that exacerbates all nine: class.

If the cultural output of the past decade confirms one thing it's that the upper classes have been emboldened and the establishment media has started to complete the work started by Blair in asserting that we were "all middle-class now". But, as I will seek to explain further in the pages of this book, a few major hiccups occurred in the steady march towards that dream. Following the financial crash of 2008, many aspirational working-class people who'd been sold the promise of social mobility by Tony Blair would soon discover that they weren't, in fact, middle-class. Or at least not by any traditional measure. Coupled with the fact that larger numbers of them than ever before had also pursued further and higher education to the effect of better understanding the structural factors governing their fate, a generation of kids from low-income, working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds found themselves not just at the sharp end of a failed dream, but better equipped than all of their predecessors to both name and resent it. I believe the media made a grave mistake in ignoring this fact. While millions suffered under the dire effects of austerity — and while a generation who'd been sold a false dream of social mobility struggled to adjust to a new era of unstable contracts and dodgy landlords — our media and its output would start to seem more elitist than at any other time in recent memory.

As an underlying premise of this book, and despite having several misgivings about other aspects of her work, I share one of the views put forward by Angela Nagle's polemic *Kill All Normies*, that during the 2000s and early 2010s the left struggled to win support on account of its often scalding and humourless delivery — one that castigated from afar and seemed excessively censorious (though Nagle's focus is on the culture wars leading to the US presidential election of 2016, her observations are no less applicable here in Britain). But my critique seeks to explain why that censorious tendency came about, looking at all the ways in which the left and the labour movement has been marginalised by the mainstream media in recent decades and, as a result, often defaulted to a style of defence. Likewise, where Nagle's theory hinges on the idea that the "leaderless internet-centric network" latterly and somewhat ironically wound up serving the interests of the right, I also believe that in this selective telling we neglect to acknowledge how the internet was also effectively harnessed by certain communities on the left to circumnavigate the increasingly monocultural and elitist tendencies of the mainstream media.

What's more, the very framing of the alt-right gives us a clue as to the origins of its existence. Only with a powerful and firmly established right-wing culture was an alternative possible — in real terms, one that diverted from the Christian strain of conservatism that had historically prevailed in Europe and America and replaced it with a style that favoured social libertarianism and identitarianism. It had the freedom to do this on account of the capitalist realism that had prevailed for decades and the failure of the press in challenging its many permutations. It was only with the mainstream agenda set firmly to the right — and with a secure basis created by the unchallenged ideology of neoliberalism — that the alt-right had the freedom and confidence to develop its brazen and wholly irreverent style of delivery, and for the likes of Milo Yiannopoulos and Steve Bannon to emerge as anything other than fanatical buffoons.

The left, by contrast, having almost no representation in the mainstream media, had the dual burden of trying to counteract this tangential movement while simultaneously trying to achieve establishment footing. In order to dispense with the overly censorious style of delivery that it had suffered from in the past, several people recognised that it would need to undergo a shift — supported by a wider movement in popular culture — to finally bite back with assertiveness and, where appropriate, humour. Crucially this didn't mean dispensing with the PC culture that has protected the vulnerable from bigotry and abuse, but becoming more alert to the ways in which PC culture and aspects of identity politics had been used selectively by the liberal media to often distract from its own structural biases and inequalities. When it came to identity politics and civil liberties, the ground made under Blair, Clinton and their acolytes appeared less an authentic expression of a deeply held belief system, and more like a response to market imperatives. As time went on, few genuinely believed that Tony Blair's repealing of Section 28 happened on any grounds other than needing to respond to a mainstream tipping-point in LGBTQ+ awareness and campaigning, building popularity and bolstering his image as the prime minister of all that was tolerant and progressive, but essentially doing very little to redress homophobic attitudes.

That isn't to say that this approach didn't achieve institutional equality and gradually build a more tolerant society. But the somewhat facile declaration of certain rights as *de rigueur*, without any meaningful or ideological challenge to the beliefs that had led to them being maligned in the first place, gave implicit approval for a core strain of bigotry and cruelty to prevail in the private confines of households up and down the country. It has also created space for a complacent, grandstanding elite to enter into what is currently being dubbed "performative wokeness" — declaring their allegiance in only the most facile terms to any emerging movement in identity politics, without forfeiting any of the privileges that exist to impede the prosperity of those under-represented groups whom they claim to defend and support — while deliberately ignoring capitalism's role in the oppression of all marginalised groups, and the many ways in which all forms of discrimination are exacerbated by class.

Critical to re-establishing a vernacular culture that is more representative of the majority, then, will be an understanding that the entry points to the mainstream avenues are not exclusively governed by quality, so much as by reigning elites protecting their own interests. Or, to take it one step further, that the very concept of quality has evolved over time to become intimately connected to the perpetuation of certain elite power structures. It is time to end the internal sense of failure we experience when we do not get the job, are not accepted into seats of learning, and do not receive awards, by exposing the deceit of social mobility and its only partial granting of access to people from working-class and low-income backgrounds based on their ability to interpret a very narrow set of rules.

A lot of what I write about will be informed by personal experience. Stuart Hall once claimed to have never made a distinction between the “objective” and “subjective” aspects of social processes, what he referred to as “the interior and the exterior social worlds”.[4] In this way, he demonstrated how the personal and political were not only inextricably linked, but equally worthy of our critical attention; and that, far from being shameful or lowly, our emotional responses to pop culture, and the points at which it intersects with politics, provides us with one of the most revealing and fascinating lenses through which to understand the modern world. This personal lens means that my focus is often on events that happened here in the UK, but they serve as a proxy for wider trends that have taken place in Western culture. The examples I use will share many similarities with events that have taken place in countries across Europe and America, where societies have also been steadily transformed by their participation in neoliberal politics.

And, finally, a note on terminology. In using the term “working class” — which has become increasingly difficult to define after the decline of industry and the trade unions — I refer to anyone from a low-income background, whose family relied on the salaries of low-paid jobs in the service or manual industries, or in low-ranking clerical work. Where appropriate, I also refer to the lower-middle class, now encompassing of a broad range of professions including teaching and junior medical staff. These two demographics have more in common economically than the lower-middle class does with the management consultants on six-figure salaries; who somewhat nonsensically also wound up passing for the "middle". Perhaps it wasn't the erasure of the working class, so much as the erasure of the upper class, that most vividly demonstrates the power of Blair and Thatcher's classless rhetoric.

After over a decade of disappointment then, *Steal as Much as You Can* is a call to build a cultural climate more reflective of the majority, given the failed promise of social mobility, the dire legacy of a neoliberal culture, and the widespread suffering caused by Tory austerity. All of which will require a degree of theft, be it through stolen opportunities, or appropriating the modes of the establishment to beat them at their own game. Much of what I'll be describing is already happening thanks to a young, tenacious generation of left-wing campaigners and organisers, and I by no means seek to claim credit for their work or to declare myself the grand discoverer of their efforts. My only hope is to frame their work within a wider history, to help shed some light on its wider significance and to incentivise more people than ever before to share in their determination to steal the narratives for themselves and for the communities to which they belong.

Education, Education, Education*

The Nineties was a strange and fascinating time. Though I was only twelve when it ended, it is a decade I remember far more vividly than the two that followed. Perhaps this is the usual effect of growing older, or perhaps there really was such a thing as a twentieth-century *fin de siècle*; the sounds ringing louder and the colours becoming more saturated under the chaos of uncertainty as we entered a new millenium. We were going somewhere, and only time would tell if that was on to higher ground, or over the precipice of some great cliff.

Accompanying the excitement that seemed to fizz, both from the neck of a bottle of Panda Pop as I stomped home from school along the Bristol Road in south Birmingham, and between the pixels that jostled for space on the blizzard holding screen when my impatient fingers ventured beyond the five terrestrial channels, was the image of a man. Tony Blair's frenzied grin was the soundtrack to a time period built on edifice. For all of the hatred that the industrial working classes felt towards Margaret Thatcher, it would be Blair who eventually put paid to many people's participation in party politics, confirming all of their worst suspicions about the political class: that they were untrustworthy and governed more by PR strategy than meaningful policies. After all, Thatcher, for all her draconian horror, could hardly be accused of pretending to be something she wasn't.

But what Blair continued under a more deceitful guise had nevertheless begun with her. Most obvious and damaging among Thatcher's domestic plans was to undermine the systems that supported working-class people.

Pulling the rug of social support out from under those at the greatest disadvantage in society was a technique devised to incentivise greater social mobility. This was Thatcher’s big plan for the economy, made most vivid by the controversial right-to-buy scheme that left councils understocked on social housing. Though Thatcher had not been in office since 1990, and her replacement, the less divisive John Major, had gone some way to pacifying some critics, the continuation of Tory rule was inescapable, and Major was still largely considered a Thatcherite puppet in the years that followed. Therefore, and on account of the sheer magnitude of her reforms, Thatcher’s presence was still being felt by the working classes when Tony Blair was elected Leader of the Opposition in 1994.

He arrived at a time of economic uncertainty following a damaging recession that took root in 1991 and marked the end of the Lawson boom of the 1980s, momentarily shattering any illusion of infinite growth and stress-testing Thatcher’s philosophy to dire effect. Unemployment levels spiked, and though this had started to be corrected by the time of the general election campaign of 1997, even parts of Thatcher’s most ardent support-base were beginning to question the credibility of her legacy. The people wanted something different. Or at least, something that smiled and gesticulated a lot.

Blair and New Labour would adapt Thatcher’s model of unabated free-market capitalism to try and better support some public services. But, as is explained in great detail by Owen Jones in his standout work on class consciousness, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, they would also go on to continue Thatcher’s legacy by making a false distinction between an aspiring and non-aspiring working class. The former would constitute that very narrow subsection of the working class with the ability and will to seize on the limited opportunities to “better” itself in the modern workplace, and the latter would constitute those who didn’t. This would cement the thinking that led to the rampant cult of the so-called benefit cheat and, more broadly, the demonization of anyone whose priority wasn't the advancement of their salary or social status. But before all of this, it would stake its election hopes on an education platform that placed schooling front and centre — something few could disagree with.

At the Blackpool Labour Party conference in 1996, when I was eight, Tony Blair challenged his party to conceive of a radical new approach to politics, one that started by giving every child in Britain as close to an equal start in life as possible. Taking to the podium and with the emphatic delivery and overwrought emotion that would eventually become his trademark, he appealed to his audience: "Ask me my main three priorities for government, and I will tell you: education, education and education."

Those three words — or rather that one word repeated for effect — would become shorthand for the New Labour agenda and one of the most effective campaigns of modern electoral history. Blair's shadow frontbench gave their full support, with John Prescott and Gordon Brown looking on from the sidelines, clapping enthusiastically, while from another corner of the hall, whooping and cheering could be heard from other members of the wider PLP.

It was easy to see why the idea resonated. The education system had long been crying out for major reform, and the policies being proposed by Blair would radically improve working-class participation in compulsory, higher and further education. The only major initiative taken by the Tory government to redress education inequality had been the Assisted Places Scheme, which granted eligible children free or subsidised admission to public schools providing they scored within the top 10-15 percentile of admission test results. Between 1981 and 1997, 80,000 children had participated in the scheme, at a cost to the UK taxpayer of around £800 million.[5] Standards in state school classrooms, meanwhile, were slipping. In Thatcher's highly rigged version of a meritocracy, clearly only the academically gifted would win. And only a very few of them at that.

But Blair and New Labour wanted to go some way to putting this right. In the ten years that he was prime minister, Blair oversaw a reduction in the size of classrooms for five-, six- and seven-year-olds to no more than thirty pupils, funded by the money saved from scrapping the Assisted Places Scheme. He also saw a 48% increase in per-pupil funding; an 18% rise in teacher pay; and the creation of some 1106 new schools, 35,000 more teaching jobs and 172,000 teaching assistant jobs. This amounted to a 9% increase in the number of people achieving five good GCSEs with English and Maths.[6]

If there was one area where New Labour was resolute and stayed true to its word, it was education. Fewer children than ever before would be failed by an inadequate and unjust system, which, in addition to the work carried out in Northern Ireland, arguably remains Blair's greatest legacy. But while many working-class parents lauded this proliferation in the opportunities afforded to their offspring, and by proxy, the man implementing it, Blair's motivations weren't as straightforwardly altruistic as they might have first seemed.

After all, the British economy under Thatcher had pivoted away from industry and towards services. The immediate returns from this resulted in the 1980s boom, but it was short-lived. Throughout the early 1990s, the British economy had begun to stall and unemployment figures started to creep back up as the former industrial heartlands failed to provide adequate alternatives for employment. Urgent measures were needed to kickstart the economy and to redress the paucity of qualified individuals to fill the kinds of industries that had emerged adjacent to the financial sector — accounting, IT, management consultancy and law. More people than ever before would need to develop the technical ability and academic skills afforded by further and higher education. If in the process thousands would forestall their job search by an extra three years, thereby skewing unemployment figures in the government’s favour, then that would just be a bonus.

A later speech delivered by Blair at the University of Birmingham in April 1997 hints at what was really happening:

> “To those who say where is Labour’s passion for social justice,” Blair bellowed, “I say education is social justice. Education is liberty. Education is opportunity. Education is the key not just to how we as individuals succeed and prosper, but to the future of this country.”[7]

Education, in other words, was necessary for kick-starting the economy, and social justice had been used to justify a continuation of the Thatcherite project, reframing individualism and education for no other purpose than the advancement of one’s cultural capital as a collectivist idea. But social justice in any real sense would have equated to an improvement of the conditions faced by the whole of the working class, not just making concessions to the academically gifted in order for them to escape it.

Labour MP Stephen Pound sums up this whole phenomenon quite succinctly in Owen Jones’ *Chavs,* asserting that “the working classes have been sold the line that they shouldn’t be there.” To survive and prosper, your only option as a working-class person is to “somehow drag yourself up”.[8]

Blair hadn’t just tactically conflated individualism with social justice, either. He had also made a promise to the British electorate whose false premise would only be revealed years later. By incentivising everyone to pursue the road of academia, with no attention to the valuable opportunities afforded by apprenticeships, for example, certain manual industries and care roles would be left under-served and undervalued. The demand for these industries wouldn’t disappear, and the extent to which the service economy would be able to compensate for the job losses caused by the dismantling of industry had either been wildly overestimated or wilfully ignored. Crucially, Blair would not be in office when the reality of this situation began to sink in, as a generation of graduates, saddled with unprecedented levels of debt, found that its numbers far outstripped the number of available or relevant jobs. In 2008, on account of the financial crisis, graduate unemployment levels were at an all-time high, but in the years since, self-employment figures for those of working age (up to sixty-five) have also remained skewed towards the youngest in society. What's more, according to the Office for National Statistics, between 2001 and 2016 the growth in self-employment was driven mainly by those who held a degree (or equivalent), with the overall share of self-employed people with a degree rising from 19.3% in 2001 to 32.6% in 2016.[9] This corresponds with what I know far more anecdotally: that a generation of young people have had to develop the resilience and tenacity to define their own careers — patching together bits of paid work and unstable contracts. This of course excludes those who pursued public sector vocations such as teaching and medicine, whose own struggles at the hands of the Tory austerity programme are well-known.

Truthfully, what was being branded as an exercise in social justice, then, was an attempt to leverage the academic capabilities of some for the sake of meeting economic demand. And what might at first have seemed like a straightforwardly altruistic agenda, on closer inspection was revealed to be intimately tied to answering the economic necessities of life post-Thatcher, irrespective of whether or not it ultimately succeeded. Had the UK retained its status as an industrial power, this conversation was unlikely to have ever happened.

As a result, academic grades had never been so prized, and practical education was being steadily supplanted by the rising tide of new academic disciplines. One of the most vivid cases is that of design and technology, which stopped being a compulsory GCSE in 2000 and by 2017 was reported to have been axed from nearly half of all UK schools.[10] Instead, wood and metal work, textiles, and home economics would be replaced by subjects that could furnish graduates with the skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace, such as business studies, ICT, media, law and psychology.

Meanwhile, those who were not academically inclined remained locked out of the conversation. In what is commonly referred to as the enduring academic-vocational divide, 25% of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds were still not in education or training by 2007, suggesting a large contingent still disenfranchised by the formal systems of education.[11] Meanwhile, only 15% of employees were said to be receiving job-related training.[12] What became apparent was that vocational training, and specifically vocational training in public sector and manual disciplines, would not be included in the country's overhauling of education. OfSTED criteria were altered accordingly, and as the pressure mounted on schools to turn out better academic results, emphasis shifted in favour of the more superficial and quantifiable outcomes of the school system.

The battle for the future of the British economy was being fought as much in the exchanges on parents evening as it was in the head offices of the Bank of England. After the plans were laid out in the government's first white paper on the subject in 1997, the education system saw a marked increase in the number of tests, targets and annual league tables. Those of us experiencing this phenomenon first-hand can attest to a doubling down on awards for the academically, musically and athletically gifted — individualistic pursuits that had once scored lower on the school achievement rankings than communal endeavour and conscientiousness. Meanwhile, teachers became possessed by a need for their classes to score well in exams, focusing more on hammering home the assessment criteria than ensuring their pupils developed a thorough and meaningful understanding of a given subject. Talking points around the kinds of skills and extra-curricular activities that might make your CV stand out or score you more UCAS points began to proliferate in British classrooms.

Even in the playground of our humble state school in Northfield in south Birmingham, there emerged the kind of competitive parenting culture you might otherwise expect to find only in the termly meetings at Cheltenham Ladies College. While those parents who weren’t squarely focused on priming their children for eleven-plus exams — not because they didn’t care about their children’s livelihoods, but because they didn’t want to put their children under so much pressure, or because they fairly assumed that they might find greater happiness in a manual job that provided them with a fair work-life balance, or perhaps most importantly, because they believed that their children’s skills lay elsewhere, in a more nurturing or manual line of work — were commonly dismissed as failures, their children becoming the subject of playground whispers.

Classes became increasingly divided along strata of ability and performance too, with “smart” kids becoming separated from their “less smart” peers by teachers who often seemed to ignore how biased their judgements were by the economic status of their pupils. Under this new way of thinking, prejudices became more entrenched, with accents, clothing, hairstyles and postures all becoming signifiers of someone’s aspirational credentials. As journalist and academic Sally Tomlinson puts it:

> While governments were encouraging more people to engage in competitive attempts to improve their human capital potential, large numbers were still excluded from entering the competition on equal terms and class structures were proving remarkably resilient.[13]

What was being driven by economic necessity would be presented at the level of teacher-student, or even teacher-parent, as a moral duty. The role of the parent and the teacher had changed from providing the necessary ingredients to furnish children with health, happiness and a basic education in order to make a meaningful contribution to society, to achieving the highest possible standards of academic attainment. Any parent or teacher who failed on this front would be judged more harshly by this new morality, which posited academic excellence as the only viable route to prosperity.

One of the gravest impacts of capitalism has been the confusion of market value with morality — for example solicitors not just being remunerated above, but being judged morally superior to, a host of other vocations from teaching assistants to plumbers — and imposing this false moral hierarchy onto the diversity of skills needed in order for a society to properly function. The judgement is implicit even in the labelling of “softer skills” required in care-giving or support roles, which, in addition to the manual skills required in industry, were always by their very nature remunerated far below the level of those skills required to perform the duties of the marketplace — strong management abilities, ruthless negotiating power, strategic thinking and a propensity for risk-taking. But New Labour’s education reforms exacerbated this tendency, ensuring that the value attached to these skills went beyond the straightforwardly economical to encroach on our most fundamental notions of righteousness and goodness.

During the 1990s, working-class people were perceived to face one of two choices: succeed in education and the professional services, or fail. The trajectory from school to university to white-collar job would become synonymous with that other core tenet of the New Labour strategy: the aspirational working class. Blair and his peers wielded the aspirational rhetoric liberally during the Nineties as a way of subtly castigating its other: the non-aspirational working class, on whose basis the profiteers of this new era of free-market capitalism were able to create their fictional bogeyman, “The Chav”.

Being a chav wasn’t just limited to financial status, but to the extent that it also encompassed a person’s adherence to the establishment’s rules of taste, it represented an expansion of Britain’s class prejudices. It was an attempt not just to police the earning potential of its working-class target, but the values and aesthetics of its cultural identity. This represented a stark contrast to the culture that had been presided over by Reagan and Thatcher, where the display of wealth in more overt and unapologetic terms had been permitted, if not actively encouraged. Its emergence would coincide with the renewed emphasis on education, sowing the seeds of a far quieter strain of judgement and castigation, as it characterised any deviance from the British establishment and its cultural reference points as tasteless, morally wanton and depraved. The cardinal sin of poverty had been replaced by something similar but crucially different: poor taste. It was no longer enough to have seized on the opportunities for financial advancement. Now the working class would also be required to erase its vernacular, its dress code, its aesthetic sensibilities. In other words, working-class people — of the upwardly mobile persuasion or otherwise — would only be tolerated by the establishment and permitted entry into its clubs and workspaces provided it remain inconspicuous. Hence why Danniella Westbrook could still be dubbed a “chav icon” in 2002 by the *Daily Mail* for wearing head-to-toe Burberry, despite at the time comfortably out-earning most middle-class people in Britain.[14]

The beliefs and values on which society was built were being steadily transformed in order to tally with the economic agenda. Mark Fisher dissects this phenomenon in *Capitalist Realism*, oftentimes pointing to tendencies so subtle we might have otherwise ignored their part in propping up a neoliberal value system. As he argues, capitalism isn’t just an organising principle of economies and governments, existing outside of and separate to the individual, but a slow and steady conquering of our philosophies, ideas and identities. This would build on the idea of “naturalization” first posited by Barthes, and on the earlier observation by Marx that the middle and upper classes find myriad ways of normalizing the systems of capital (see popular idioms such as, *dog-eat-dog*, *it's every man for himself*, and perhaps most significantly, *there's no such thing as society*, and later, *class*).

Parents had become the primary agents of Blair's future vision for Britain, and the pressure mounted on them to raise their children according to the new individualistic value system necessitated by the marketplace. Of the many cardinal sins that accompanied this new economic belief system, truancy attracted the most press attention when in 1999 it became government policy to fine the parents of serial offenders by £2,500. The liberty and opportunity of education which Tony Blair had referred to in his earlier speech was now subject to a whole new level of law enforcement, and with that came the assertion that truancy wasn't merely the result of children feeling disenfranchised, but rather connected to that fixation of playground gossip-hounds and radio call-in shows: bad parenting.

To raise this ultra-bright, ultra-ambitious generation, parents and teachers did away with the distant, authoritative styles of the past in order to prioritise the child's self-determination, self-belief and academic prowess. Cue the widespread adoption of the more participatory "child-centred" approach, an idea popularised in the 1980s but which found fertile ground in the cultures that were borne of Blair's softer aspirational rhetoric.[15] This style of teaching, and parenting, gave greater precedence to the child's own viewpoint, in favour of administering lessons from afar and by a series of direct instructions. Grades and extracurricular achievements became the hallmark of sound parenting; and those who lacked the time and resources to provide their children with music, drama lessons and additional tutoring — once a luxury, now common fare for working- and lower-middle-class households — were judged to be failing.

At the same time, wider trends in globalisation were making the world seem far smaller and far more accessible to everyone. The widespread availability of low-cost air travel, the dawn of the internet, and the huge advances being made in digital technologies created the impression of a world built for, and around, these aspirant young people. Increasingly, the world was judged not through the prism of local community, but as a wide and open playing field, whose opportunities could be mined by the intelligent and canny in order to achieve whatever it was they wanted.

The generation now broadly dubbed “millennial” came of age at a time when people took an almost obsessive interest in children’s education. We probably felt a greater sense of self-importance than previous generations, but were at the same time under an immense amount of pressure to perform and to make full use of this unprecedented degree of opportunity. I was one of the millions of working-class people who attended university, something that would have seemed unthinkable to mine and millions of people’s parents, and while there were many who used this opportunity to pursue the road of social mobility as intended, there would be many others who seized on it in other ways too.

On the podium at the University of Birmingham in 1997, Tony Blair described an opportunity for anyone to escape the class into which they were born. What he failed to realise was that members of this smart and somewhat precocious generation that he had created might also view this as an opportunity to immerse itself in the likes of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, the Frankfurt School, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Naomi Klein and the many other spokespeople of a tradition(s) that stood diametrically opposed to both him and the Thatcherite legacy he preserved.

In setting out to create a generation of young professionals to carry out the duties of an increasingly service-based economy, what seemed to have escaped both Blair’s attention, and that of the political and media class more broadly, was the reality that they had also created something far scarier than the fictional mob of chavs they’d invented. They’d created a well-educated working and lower-middle class on a fact-finding mission to understand the forces that had so far acted against it.

Cruel Britannia*

The deep ruptures that existed within the Labour Party would be prevented from all-out conflict during the early 2000s by the various factions standing broadly united in their opposition to the expansionist, warmongering agenda of Blair and Bush. In this sense, the Iraq War forestalled an introspection at the level of mainstream politics into the corruption and selling-off of the left-wing cause, acting as a false flag of unity and distracting from the neoliberal crisis into which the party had been plunged. The same was broadly true of the Democratic Party in America, whose highly punitive Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act destroyed the lives of millions of black Americans, not to mention Clinton's mishandling of the Yugoslav Wars, as well as the multiple accusations of sexual misconduct. On both sides of the Atlantic, then, the faltering neoliberal project lingered in a convenient state of purgatory for several years, continuing to make electoral gains despite causing a sense of deep-seated unease among both parties' traditional support bases.

Academics and dyed-in-the-wool socialists are keen to reflect on the core strain of scepticism that always persisted towards Blair, but in my experience, Labour voters weren't consciously thinking about the ideological rifts that had beset their party. Instead, it was this sense of unease — of something being fundamentally awry even outside of the Iraq War — that most fairly characterised the turn of the century in British working-class and left-wing culture. Part of the problem was that the limitations of a bipartisan political system that traded in opposites had eliminated the possibility for nuance or any popular discussion of political ideology, to the extent that many lacked clear frameworks with which to understand Blair's fateful shift in the Labour Party's *raison d'etre*. Feeling itself increasingly loyal by default, rather than owing to any real affinity with the party leadership, the working-class and traditional Labour support base would experience far-ranging disillusionment with and paranoia towards the political class, increasingly finding itself on the back foot and uncertain of its own judgement.

Part of that feeling was also borne of the fact that several of its leading lights in entertainment and pop culture, who had risen to fame in the heady climate that was created in the late 1990s, had been forced to retreat, disappearing behind the relatively barren cultural landscape of the early twenty-first century. With the exposure of Blair's true politics, the era in 1990s pop culture that he had keenly exploited to serve his own ends would start to seem both foolhardy and hypocritical, having initially built on a tradition of working-class vernacular art that took aim at the capitalist class and made explicit references to the likes of Vivienne Westwood, Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols. Faced with the reality that it had been used to usher in an extension of Thatcher's ideology, as well as an aggressive, expansionist foreign policy, it was a trend that would eventually leave many of its main proponents looking tarnished and humiliated, plagued by a sense of guilt, self-doubt and absurdity. In this sense, after the exuberance of the Blair years, the pop culture of the early twenty-first century was characterised by a malaise that concealed a deep sense of embarrassment and shame.

Financial growth during the 1980s and 1990s created a media more inclined to take risks, which equated to more working-class stories and the creation of many working-class stars. The rhetoric surrounding social mobility, and its attendant strain of pop-culture, would not arrive to supplant this trend until the late 1990s. On the face of it and in the first instance then, the presence in the media of people from low-income backgrounds who lived outside of the M25 had a liberating effect on communities who saw themselves — their culture, their issues and their sense of humour — increasingly reflected back in TV programming, magazine editorials and music. Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell — two girls from south London, one with crooked teeth and a frankly filthy appetite for booze and cigarettes, the other with a propensity for breaking out into violent fits of rage — had become two of the most celebrated beauties on Earth. Meanwhile, musicians, presenters and actors with regional accents and a flagrant disregard for the studied tropes of the establishment started to abound.

At the more subversive end of the scale, this trend actually revealed the extent to which working-class people were still heavily maligned and marginalised by the establishment — with the overwhelming majority of people in Britain suddenly, and miraculously, transformed into a subculture. Naomi Klein writes about a similar phenomenon in relation to black culture in America and the use of young black men to elevate the cool credentials of brands such as Nike and Tommy Hilfiger. This technique, which she calls cool-hunting, "simply means black-culture hunting", mining and thereby reinforcing the "edgy" (read: marginal) status of its targets.[16] With the cult of the middle manager at an all-time high in Britain, it was enough to simply live on a council estate, smoke and occasionally swear to be characterised as the late twentieth century's edgy outsider.

Nevertheless, despite how much internalised working-class shame had been promulgated during the Thatcher years, the working and lower-middle classes now dared to finally assert themselves. However falsely, Britpop, Cool Britannia and its attendant trends elsewhere in pop culture leant a certain degree of hope and pride to the working classes, providing the belief that they could participate in and potentially influence public life, and created the perfect setting for a tenacious politician to seize back control from the Tories. Tony Blair understood that he would have to chop off his bouncy hairdo, whip on a suit and study some of the frontman swagger that was earning his Britpop peers daily column inches, but he was up for the challenge. After all, he had famously fronted his own band Ugly Rumours at Oxford, along with Adam Sharples, who at the time of writing serves as the Director General of the Employment Group at the Department for Work and Pensions.

By learning from these outspoken, working-class upstarts, Blair would be able to temporarily discard his public-school image and mount a successful election campaign that promised to end suffering, redress entrenched prejudice and return some dignity to working-class life. It was an unprecedented collision of pop culture and politics, forever immortalised in the image of Noel Gallagher and Meg Matthews quaffing champagne with Blair at 10 Downing Street — Gallagher's band Oasis representing a zenith of this outspoken and brazenly working-class trend in pop culture, and their well-publicised feuds with fellow Britpop bands Suede and (though their upper-middle-class credentials serve as something of an anomaly here) Blur becoming a proxy war for the public to perform its various regional and class allegiances.

In contrast to the slick media types who had orchestrated so many of the decade's pop careers, Oasis had been discovered and managed by a man who seemed eager to retain his working-class credentials. Alan McGee had risen to prominence in the 1980s, and by the time of the mid-1990s, had already launched the careers of Primal Scream and the Jesus and Mary Chain. Everything down to his strong Glaswegian accent and misanthrope's sneer seemed antithetical to the maniacal ambition of the other record label bosses and industry types who surrounded him. Unlike the vast majority of them, his distaste for Thatcher was widely known, and in the lead up to the general election of 1997, he reportedly made a donation of £50,000 to the Labour Party.[17] This led to him being invited to Number 10 in the wake of

Blair’s victory, where, in the famous photos that emerged from the event, McGee can be seen behind the prime minister and a gleeful Noel Gallagher, unsmiling as ever, though apparently only for the fact that this was his natural demeanour, and not on account of having yet seen through the prime minister’s PR spin.

However fleetingly, normal people were given the impression of having unprecedented access to the systems of power that had excluded and punished them for so long. Likewise, comedians had been given free rein to be more direct and more flagrant in their criticism of elites. Two of the decade’s most important artists — Caroline Aherne and Steve Coogan — were both unashamed about deriding their upper-class peers, while also never shying away from criticising the racist and homophobic corners of working-class culture (performing as her alias Mrs Merton, Aherne once famously asked Bernard Manning: “So, who do you vote for now Hitler’s dead?”). They would be responsible for authoring some of the decade’s seminal work, with both *The Royle Family* and Coogan’s character Alan Partridge consistently achieving Pinteresque levels of bathos, though also remaining squarely within the realm of what was popular and accessible.

In their work, both Aherne and Coogan built on a tradition of working-class comedians who affectionately shone a light on the more absurd parts of working-class culture, while always skewering the establishment with their slight but sure ability to impersonate and satirise. Where their predecessors Victoria Wood, Julie Walters and others like them played within the rules of the British establishment, carefully crafting their brand of comedy so as not to offend the sensibilities of the upper classes too aggressively, both of these outspoken young Mancunians came with more bite and more bravado, their comedy appearing at times like a covert attempt to infiltrate and thus undermine the BBC or whichever other broadcaster had been bold enough to air their shows — to the extent that Alan Partridge now arguably serves as the only lasting example of direct social and political satire in Britain. For all these reasons, Aherne and Coogan emerged as two of the great auteurs in a decade of mixed cultural output, whose bravado and appetite for chaos could often spill over into gratuitous offense. They represented what was possible when working-class creative voices were given the opportunity to rise to the top and broadcast to the masses.

However, both Coogan and Aherne, Britpop musicians, and even their management, were riding on the coattails of a sustained effort by several groups to radically democratise the media since the 1950s. Most famous among these were outlets such as Granada Television, whose output was designed to challenge the centralised London media and was responsible for producing some of the country's longest-standing and best-loved TV shows, including *Coronation Street*, which in its early days had been injected with the scriptwriting prowess of Jim Allen, a long-time collaborator of filmmaker Ken Loach. At its best, this sustained commitment to telling the stories of working-class communities would produce the likes of *Our Friends in the North* (1996), the TV drama series authored by Tyneside playwright Peter Flannery and starring a young Christopher Eccleston, Daniel Craig, Mark Strong and Gina McKee in a saga that spanned decades of British political and social turmoil; as well as *Boys from the Black Stuff* (1982), authored by the superlative Alan Bleasdale, and *Edge of Darkness* (1985) by Scottish writer Troy Kennedy Martin. By the 1990s, this concerted effort would finally reach its mainstream tipping point. But the rise in working-class representation on our TV screens also coincided with the emergence of a more commodified entertainment industry, whose smarmy veneer would forever be immortalised in the strained, insincere grin of Noel Edmonds.

Under the newly reinstated illusion of endless financial growth, broadcasters and production companies entered into an almost nihilistic pursuit of ever more reckless TV formats, whose aesthetics were always fitting of the capitalist, boom-and-bust conditions in which they'd been born: bold, brash and unapologetic. This included *The Big Breakfast*, whose bubblegum staging fell somewhere between the set of an Almodóvar movie and the landscaping at Disneyland, and whose first presenter Chris Evans would become the high priest of the gung-ho TV genre, going on to produce a roster of similar shows whose success levels varied wildly, including both *TFI Friday* and *Don't Forget Your Toothbrush.* Meanwhile, and in what now reads like a perfect simulacrum of this heady and bewildering time in pop culture, Evans would also escape mass castigation despite marrying a teenager who he wooed on their first date with a £100,000 Ferrari. For every great working-class auteur that the decade produced, many more, often working-class upstarts with a thirst for fame would be ripe for exploitation by an emerging class of money-hungry TV and PR execs.

Women would bear the brunt of this particularly ugly side of the decade's fun facade. The most vivid example being a marketing stunt by the lads' mag *FHM* to project Gail Porter's naked body onto the side of the Houses of Parliament — *Cool! Irreverent! Zany!* — but also deeply traumatic for the young woman who'd been talked into it. Meanwhile *The Big Breakfast* presenter Kelly Brook was ridiculed on an almost daily basis by her colleagues for not having the same presenting chops as a trained professional, and subsequently lumped along with a roster of other women of the decade who the tabloid media saw fit to characterise as sexy, if a bit dumb.

These accented, outspoken women and others like them profited in the first instance from the fact that TV bosses had realised the enormous appetite for a more representative media, but they would also fall prey to a merciless profit-making mentality, divorced from any greater morality, that had evolved since Thatcher and which found even more fertile ground in the bizarre cultural climate created by the New Labour years. This might seem antithetical given that New Labour has been essentially touted as Thatcherism-lite, but it was just that dilution, or distortion (neoliberalism allowing for the corruption of its very own definition), that would leave people's judgements so impaired. Where unabated capitalism had been a distinct ideology belonging to the Conservative Party, it was also a clearly identifiable enemy. Under New Labour's collapsing of capitalist ideology with the language and rhetoric of socialism and collectivism, however, the boundaries had been blurred to the extent that few could easily navigate the difference between entertainment and commerce, advertising and authentic sentiment, establishment and anti-establishment ideas. What resulted was a Wild West of corrupted symbolism, creating pitfalls in our ability to process basic messaging. A working class that was increasingly being dismantled and undermined in real terms could be held up as a hollow symbol of a more progressive and inclusive era in politics and culture.

This was arguably nowhere more apparent than in the marketing of terrace culture, which popularised streetwear and transformed football fans — once a maligned and derided underclass — into the subject of countless editorials in fashion magazines such as *The Face* and *i-D*. It would reflect the commercialisation of an important pillar of working-class communities, riding on the back of football's presentable facelift following the creation of the Premier League in 1992, which had delivered a large cash injection to the game. By the mid-Nineties, fashion designers were using its aesthetics to create trends that dictated an explosion in the sale of Adidas, Umbro, pearlescent polyester shirts, track tops, hair clippers, and earrings. Meanwhile, working-class football fans were being gradually priced out of the game, whose tickets soared on average by 1000% in the two decades that followed.[18]

This would set off a trend that continues to the present day, of working-class symbolism being co-opted by the middle and upper classes in order to stake their place in cool, with attendees of the members-only Groucho Club in Soho, where the likes of Tracey Emin and members of All Saints rubbed shoulders with Nigel Lawson, piling out in a heady mix of cigarette smoke and streetwear. Only now is the co-opting by the establishment of working-class aesthetics being finally debunked as both crass and problematic — as an attempt to conceal some of capitalism's most pernicious tendencies including nepotism and private schooling. But in the early days, and without the privilege of hindsight, it would seem exhilarating, creating the impression that a loud-mouthed and boisterous working-class identity had finally and irrevocably supplanted the stuffy, middle-class identity of the old establishment.

In other words, by the time that the efforts of credible working-class arts institutions such as Granada collided with the upstart mentality of the new Blairite media class, they were ripe for being co-opted, and therefore corrupted. Elsewhere, the New Deal implemented by Labour in 1998, which granted power to withdraw benefits from anyone who "refused reasonable employment", largely prohibited musicians from claiming the same subsidies that had supported working-class artists and musicians for decades. In his book *Inner City Pressure: The Story of Grime*, Dan Hancox recounts how damaging this was for the genre, but also for musicians across the board, referring to a line quoted in the *NME* at the time by Jarvis Cocker, who claimed that without the dole during the 1980s, Pulp would have been unlikely to make it to the 1990s.[19]

Meanwhile, the symbolism that marketeers had developed to accompany the so-called Cool Britannia trend would start to curdle under a heightened awareness of Britain's colonial past and hegemonic present following the onset of the Iraq War, thereby also tainting the somewhat naive and optimistic young popstars and celebrities who were forced to carry it in various marketing stunts. At the heart of Cool Britannia was a commoditization of the Union Jack, which thanks to a large-scale rebranding effort, saw it transformed from a symbol of oppression (as per headlines that accompanied the British departure from Hong Kong in 1996), to becoming, for a short time, the trademark of a future-facing image of Britain *the lifestyle*. In this version, post-Empire didn't mean a timid retreat into economic and political self-abasement, but the rather more arrogant and disingenuous assertion of Britain as the benign authority on all matters cultural and social. The one-time stuffy nucleus of a crumbling Empire would be reimagined by the PR gods as the epicentre of all that was cool, progressive and influential, leaving the imperialist overtones intact, but dressed up in the slightly more irreverent, slightly more zany guise of a multi-coloured pinstripe suit, shouting the merits of Britpop, the YBAs and Richard bloody Branson.

Stuart Hall has argued that the post-colonial and the global were two sides of the same coin, and that in the latter, "the older colonial mentalities refused to vanish".[20] While his statement referred to the persistent economic subjugation by rich Western nations of former colonial territories, it nevertheless also permeated popular culture. What we witnessed in the 1990s was a version of imperialism-lite, writ large in Geri Halliwell's infamous Union Jack dress while doing her best *Saturday Night Fever* impression at the Brit awards, or Kate Moss wearing a similarly branded jumper at the opening of London Fashion Week in 1997. Britain wasn't a global superpower anymore, so much as a *frame of mind*, capable of transcending borders and winning people over with its weird humour and appetite for pints. This rebranding of Britain sought to elevate its cool credentials to incentivise investment, trade and greater levels of consumerism, while those implementing it were absolved of the responsibility for being the spokespeople for a new kind of nationalism, deferring instead to the eager young TV and popstars who were happy to do it for them.

And easily persuadable, working-class TV and popstars weren't the only collateral in the campaign to bolster the public perception of Blair's new Britain. In his book *1997*, Richard Power Sayeed goes to great lengths to outline the many ways in which Blair and his acolytes bulldozed and mollified a range of protest movements and grassroots causes for the sake of positioning themselves not only as the party of the people, but the party of all that was progressive and seemingly inclusive, illustrating how the establishment of the 1990s used its "proximity to progressive cause[s] to further its own reactionary agenda".[21] This strategy would include efforts by Blair, and the political class more broadly, to hijack the anti-racist and feminist movements, among others, in the name of generating positive PR and framing their efforts in a way that suggested a more progressive era in politics.

Most vivid among these was the heroic campaign mounted by Doreen Lawrence in response to her son Stephen's murder in 1993 to redress systemic racism and prevent cases of injustice from being perpetrated against black people in Britain. In 1997, Jack Straw ordered an enquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence in the first months of his role as Home Secretary, with the aim of uncovering errors made by the Metropolitan Police in bringing Stephen's killers to justice. The resulting report, known as the Macpherson Report, contained the assertion that the Metropolitan Police was guilty of widespread institutionalised racism. Blair would proclaim on *BBC Question Time* that the report's findings would lead to "a new era in race relations"[22], while Straw went on to implement a litany of measures designed to stamp out police racism and prevent other such miscarriages of justice from happening again.

As they were presented, these motivations would hardly seem controversial. But in their implementation, the government was accused of failing to address the root cause of the problem and the mechanisms by which the black community continued to be targeted. The fallout of the Macpherson Report fell short of inducing the level of introspection within the British establishment needed to make any meaningful impact. To understand just how superficial these efforts were, we need only consider Jack Straw's immediate dismissal of a report authored by Stuart Hall and others commissioned by the Runnymede Trust, entitled *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain.* The Trust had been founded in the intellectual climate that Doreen was responsible for creating, and which gave Jack Straw the impetus to approve it. But by the late 1990s Straw had lost his nerve. "In response", Hall writes,

> he went scurrying back to the writings of George Orwell — containing a sort of love letter to a certain version of Englishness — in order to establish the virtues of English nationalism so as to counter our arguments. The only parts of our Report which interested him were the passages on "social cohesion", which became — for a time — a defensive mantra in government circles, before disappearing down Mr Cameron's "multiculturalism is dead" plughole.[23]

Chief among the complaints of the government's response to the Macpherson Report was the continuation of then-Metropolitan Police commissioner, Paul Condon, who had held the office since before Stephen's murder in 1993. This would suggest that there was a willingness to overlook Condon's incompetence and pardon his oversights, the implications of which would seriously jeopardise the safety of black people in Britain. In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the white, male, Oxbridge-educated elite would still be judged as fit for purpose and continue to maintain its assumption of power and authority. It would not face dismissal, but be given a firm slap on the wrist and told to make some serious changes. Meanwhile, the Report's other findings led to the perpetuation of another harmful assumption: that either by their own doing or society's, the problem still lay squarely with the black community.

Widespread criticism of the Macpherson Report and its fallout focussed on the inadvertent effect of emphasizing the differences between minority groups *in relation to* the white establishment, and how the white establishment might be better equipped to manage that dynamic. The overtones were still fundamentally imperialist, and this exceptionalism created a haven for those old racist attitudes to reside, leading to further misuse in practice. In 2012, for example, a study published by the Equality and Human Rights Commission found that black people in the UK were still twenty-eight times more likely to be stopped and searched by a police officer than their white counterparts[24] — a figure which has steadily grown since an, albeit temporary, dip in the immediate wake of the Macpherson Report being published.[25] But even taking this temporary dip into account, the Macpherson Report ultimately sanctioned stop and search tactics by suggesting the practice continue to be used at the same rate, albeit by a more benign and tolerant police force.

Nevertheless, Blair capitalised on the Macpherson Report, presenting it as an achievement in and of itself. Two years later, when New Labour mounted their second election campaign, Doreen would again accuse Blair of wielding her son’s death, and the cultural movement that had built around the Report, in the name of political point-scoring.[26] For those invested in the case and following it closely, her words rang true, and it was plain to see how skilfully Blair had used the case to his advantage. But to your average person watching the election campaign via the five-minute segments contained within the nine o’clock news, or via the snatches that were presented in the tabloid press, Blair had done enough to present himself as the arbiter of a more inclusive society.

This would build on his work in Northern Ireland, which was undoubtedly a milestone in one of the longest standing and bloodiest struggles in British colonial history, even if it was rarely understood as such by the British people. Repeated terrorist attacks had given successive governments an easy route out of explaining Britain’s colonial legacy, and a way of delegitimizing the Republican cause as little more than the violent outburst of a few radicalised individuals. On the world stage, the Good Friday Peace Agreement, signed in April 1998, would be viewed as the final step towards curtailing the powers of Empire. On the ground, however, it would be judged as one man’s successful attempt to defeat terrorism. The Omagh Bomb a few months later might have complicated the overarching narrative, but it did so only in Blair and New Labour’s favour, becoming a symbol of what many believed would have continued had he not intervened.

All of which worked for a time, and conspired to make Blair one of the most popular UK prime ministers in modern history. By the time of his second general election campaign, some 51% of people polled by Gallup named Blair as their choice for prime minister, giving him one of the highest approval ratings of any national leader anywhere in the world.[27] At the level of economics and policy, the education reforms had proven a hit, as had the fact that unemployment had fallen by a considerable margin. Blair’s second electoral success against Conservative leader William Hague would narrowly miss the events of 9/11, the knock-on effects of which would derail his career in ways that almost nobody could have predicted, alienating both the pacifist contingent and also the big-c conservative types who were embarrassed by such an explicit act of cowardice towards the US president George W. Bush.

In the interim between first being elected, and becoming complicit in a war that the UN judged to be illegal[28], New Labour had gone to great lengths to align itself with the working classes and popular protest movements that were being waged on Britain’s airwaves and TV networks. They had done so in order to create the impression of a more progressive image of the party and of Britain more broadly, positioning Blair not merely as the prime minister, but as the harbinger of a new, more progressive moral philosophy.

But with the Iraq War, the final reckoning for the Blair years had come. Its incomprehensible magnitude would be exploited by the New Labour contingent at the time to present it as little more than an unfortunate, diplomatic necessity whose effects were distant and abstract. But on a much more domestic and immediate level, it would be impossible to escape the true callousness of the administration following its treatment of Professor David Kelly, whose tragic death has been all but erased from the popular narrative of contemporary British political history.

On 22 May 2003, BBC journalist Andrew Gilligan broadcast a report on the *Today* programme claiming to have insider evidence to suggest that the UK’s claim that the Iraqi government possessed WMDs capable of reaching Britain within forty-five minutes was in fact false. In a report into the Iraqi arsenal, Kelly had supposedly indicated to the government that the claim was at least dubious — facts that he stood accused of having shared with the BBC, whose own report would imply that Alastair Campbell had used the forty-five-minute claim to “sex up” the dossier that was used to justify Britain’s part in the war.

The *Today* report amounted to a PR catastrophe, and, as the ensuing tension mounted, government staff pressed the BBC to reveal its source. When the BBC weren’t forthcoming in revealing to the government their source, several lines of enquiry were opened, leading to Kelly being identified as the likely insider. He was asked to appear as a witness before two committees of the House of Commons, one of which was televised. The resulting footage shows Kelly drawn and exhausted, his harrowed, sunken face appearing hauntingly antithetical to the maniacal smile of New Labour that had been imprinted on the public retina only a few years earlier. Two days after appearing before the committee, Kelly was found dead of a suspected suicide near his home in Oxfordshire.

As the news broke and war continued to rage, everything associated with the Blair years would be cast into doubt. The British public, and in particular Labour's traditional support base, felt betrayed; the period of celebration that followed the apparent redressing of certain entrenched inequalities was being swiftly exposed as little more than elaborate theatrics. At the same time, what meaningful advances seemed to have been made in achieving a more democratic cultural landscape reflective of the working-class majority was undermined by a PR and marketing machine in overdrive, responsible for whipping us into a state of excitement and subsequent paranoia. We'd been given a taste of what a more democratic media might look like, only for it to be left looking foolhardy and ridiculous.

"Everybody at the time wanted the Tories out", Oasis manager McGee reflected in an interview with the *Guardian* in 2013, "What we didn't realise was that we were voting in the Hugo Boss version of the Tories instead of the more conservative tweed suit version that was already in place after Thatcher and the Major years."[29]

McGee would eventually declare his support in 2009 for future prime minister David Cameron, before admitting to having voted for Liberal Democrat candidate Roger Williams in the 2010 general election. Perhaps this political U-turn was borne of the fact that McGee had faced widespread criticism from the Labour Party in 2000 after donating to Malcolm McLaren's London Mayoral campaign, who was running against Labour candidate Ken Livingstone — an event that would lead him to accuse Tony Blair of being both a "control freak" and, rather unoriginally, likening the party to George Orwell's *1984*. Whatever the particulars, and while McGee is by no means a reliable barometer of political feeling in the UK more broadly, his example nevertheless demonstrates how quickly, and how far, the Cool Britannia years had soured. There was a feeling that the working classes had been more keenly exploited than ever before for the purposes of propping up an extension of Thatcherism. With its one foray into public consciousness blighted by the legacy of a war-mongering, capitalist political regime, it would be even more quick to second-guess itself, leaving it more exposed than ever before to the attacks of middle-class naysayers seeking to delegitimize and negate its cultural identity.

While the working classes had been steadily milked for all their entertainment value, another quieter and more resilient trend in pop culture had also started to emerge, one that prioritised the language and ideas of social mobility. Home improvement and personal makeover shows defined a certain strain of middlebrow TV programming of the early 2000s, acting more like public service announcements on the practical ways of transforming into the middle-class ideal. This was one aspect of Blair's legacy that would not be ruined by the onset of the Iraq War, but which would become absorbed into the language of TV and popular entertainment, setting off a long-term trend for shows that traded on social and financial dissatisfaction. *Changing Rooms* and *What Not to Wear* dealt in educating us on the ways of good taste, albeit to highly questionable degrees of success. And though they might seem twee and ridiculous to us now, they represented the wholesale acceptance of an idea that while the working classes might be cool and entertaining, their lifestyles no longer represented a long-term viable option for the respectable people of Britain. Any signifiers of working-class culture needed to be erased, whether that was through the application of a terracotta daubing effect or an M&S fake pashmina, paving the way for later reality TV formats that not only ridiculed working-class participants, but perpetuated an idea of redemption through fame and riches. Of course, the concept of keeping up with the Joneses wasn't new or unique to the 1990s, but the phenomenon had become far more widespread and central to the ambitions and life choices of the working and lower-middle classes than at any other time in recent history, transposing on to the whole of society the behaviours of that one vainglorious neighbour at the end of your cul-de-sac.

To grasp the full extent of this transformation culture, and its ability to supplant almost any other measure of reward or achievement, consider the fact that in celebration of his honouring as “Man of the Millennium” in 1999, Nelson Mandela returned home from a diplomatic trip abroad to find the team from *Ground Force* in his back garden. Celebrity gardener Alan Titchmarsh and his accomplices Charlie Dimmock and Tommy Walsh stood waiting to present their honorary pergolas and water features to the South African president. Mandela was gracious, thanking them and praising their efforts, though admittedly failing to muster the same enthusiasm he had for the Spice Girls two years earlier — describing that event as the “best day of my life”, and of the girls themselves, his “heroes”.

The Lost Decades*

The generation that inherited this absurd cultural legacy would scarcely be able to find tenable housing, let alone customise it in accordance with home makeover shows. While the income of young adults had increased by only 19% between 1997 and 2018, house prices had risen by an eye-watering 173%[30], creating a generation perpetually locked out of home-ownership. But this generation would also be comprised of an unprecedented number of university graduates, many of whom had been exposed to economic and political ideas alternative to capitalism. In a beautiful stroke of irony, it would be graduates of Tony Blair’s “education, education, education” who would help to bring Marxism back into mainstream political discussion. Additionally, cultural studies would prove to be one of the most fertile and essential academic disciplines of the late twentieth century, with founding father Stuart Hall having already begun the important work of documenting the slow and steady transformation of the Labour Party to align with Thatcher’s vision of Britain by the time Blair was elected prime minister in 1997.[31]

Hall, and those working in a similar tradition, would be responsible for creating a new strain of intellectualism in Britain, one that was far more rooted in the everyday than the approaches peddled by historic seats of learning like Oxbridge. Cultural studies in and of itself represented a more egalitarian strain of academia, insisting on the academic significance of everyday phenomena, including aspects of the working-class experience and popular culture. These, it argued, could be used as valid points of entry in understanding the ways in which society was ordered, and the systems of power that governed its fate.

As such, cultural studies as a discipline was antithetical to the abstract, market thinking of neoliberalism, and questioned the assumptions that had led to the dismantling of social support and community in favour of rampant individualism and capital. Hall himself credits the origins of cultural studies to the widespread, grassroots campaigning of two groups he was renowned for championing — the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) and the New Left.[32] Its focal point would often be the experience of working-class immigrant communities, whose cultures had been excavated and exploited for decades without little to no remuneration, credit or concession to the mainstream avenues of politics, media and culture. As Hall writes:

> vernacular lived cultures spoke more powerfully than — and as a substitute for — formal politics. Popular religion and urban culture became proxy symbolic resources in which poverty, social discontent, people's disaffiliation from the system, class interests, racialized divisions and political differences found expression.[33]

Though he was speaking about the emergence of a black Afro-centric consciousness, this would prove to be the foundational premise of cultural studies more broadly and was equally true of other identities, be those along lines of race or class (or of course, both). In this sense, the creation of cultural studies wasn't just an effort to give these issues the academic attention they deserved, but to excavate them from the world of anthropology and sociology, where they had been reduced to artefacts through colonial oppression, and to instate their authors and creators as valid narrators of history.

On account of New Labour's education reforms, interest in the area of cultural studies began to reach critical mass during the 2000s, lending a fresh perspective on some of the political crises of the time and injecting public discourse surrounding the Iraq War with an academic rigour, fomenting a more thorough and widespread examination of the colonial discourse that had been used to justify it. But the appetite to air the ugly origins of British imperialism bucked a larger trend in the cultural output of the 2000s that was otherwise defined by a sense of nihilism and irreverence.

This has been somewhat lazily attributed to the rise of the internet, as if the medium itself necessitated irony. But while the distance and anonymity afforded by the internet arguably encouraged more combative behaviour, its ability to connect people was equally enabling of bonds and allegiances. Far more likely, then, is that the idea that with the help of the internet, a generation was able to more easily and collectively identify and process the harmful permutations of late capitalism. Their cynicism wouldn't be *created by* the internet, but it would be shared far quicker and become much more entrenched *as a result of it*. What was driving it was a legitimate observation of the growing number of false pretences under which society was governed: the false promise of a political class who forfeited integrity for PR nous; the false promise of an advertising industry that eroded the cultures it sold back to us; and the false idea of a more democratic society that really only served to embolden those in power.

The effect that all of this had on the morale of a generation cannot be underestimated, and is fairly well summed-up by David Foster Wallace in his famous essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again", based on his experiences travelling on a luxury cruise liner. Wallace dissects the extreme artifice of that experience with the same, bemused outsider perspective that made him famous, using it as a vehicle to explore the methods of deception and delusion underpinning our concept of luxury — how we can transform the fairly sexless and laborious pursuit of seafaring into something rare and decadent. In relation to the advert, or advertorial, that had been written by author Frank Conroy to promote the cruise, Wallace writes that:

> An ad that pretends to be art is — at absolute best — like somebody who smiles at you only because he wants something from you. This is dishonest, but what's insidious is the cumulative effect that such dishonesty has on us: a perfect facsimile or simulacrum of goodwill without goodwill's real spirit… it messes with our heads and eventually starts upping our defences even in cases of genuine smiles and real art and true goodwill.

The effect of this, he argues, is to leave us feeling "confused and lonely and impotent and angry and scared."[34]

Coming of age at a time when the Blair years were being dramatically blown apart, the Bill Clinton legacy torn to shreds and the cultural output of an entire decade cast into doubt, this inventory of emotion resonates with what I and several of my contemporaries report feeling at the time: after the exuberance of the late Nineties, there was a malaise in pop culture that concealed a deep sense of embarrassment and shame. The optimism of the previous decade would seem naive, its garish spectacle casting a long shadow over a subsequent decade characterised by warfare and, later, extreme economic precarity.

The YBAs had transformed art into grotesque caricature, embracing an absurd level of greed and corruption. If Damien Hirst, the Chapman Brothers, Tracey Emin and their peers had been successful in passing off their connections with the likes of Charles Saatchi in the name of exploring the corrosive potential of capital in the first instance, then by the mid-2000s they had become some of its most passionate advocates. It became increasingly apparent that many of these artists had enjoyed the joint privilege of presenting themselves as a challenge to the establishment whilst also enriching themselves via a market that has long stood accused of facilitating corruption and money laundering.[35] In 2011 Emin, who had staked her career on being the flagrant voice of working-class Margate, declared her support for the Conservative Party, claiming that a vote for the Tories would be the only valid vote for the country's creative industries.[36]

Meanwhile, Blur bassist Alex James, whose band had never been too far away from accusations of Torydom, became a card-carrying member of the so-called Chipping Norton Set — an outpost of the British media, consisting of some of its most famous and vocal Tory supporters and made famous by its involvement in the controversial phone hacking scandal, which in addition to having disrupted the lives of countless celebrities and the families of those involved in the 7/7 bombings, was most famous for causing disruption to the investigation into the murder of schoolgirl Milly Dowler in 2002. The Chipping Norton Set included the likes of News UK CEO Rebekah Brooks, who was eventually cleared of all charges connected to the scandal, as well as David Cameron and his wife Samantha. It also included former *Top Gear* host Jeremy Clarkson, who in 2015 was dismissed from the BBC on account of having punched a producer for offering him a cold meat platter in place of the steak that he so violently desired. James would prove to be their cheese-touting hipster friend, putting paid to any previous efforts made to try and conceal his — and by extension, Blur's — status as exports of the bohemian, consumer-shunning middle classes. James would go on to become the creator of several food festivals which have since gone bankrupt, including the cleverly titled Big Feastival, co-hosted with "national treasure" Jamie Oliver. Damon Albarn, on the other hand was following in the footsteps of White Saviour musicians Bono and Bob Geldof, making the musical equivalent to the aid charity Oxfam's "Give a Man a Fish" TV ad with his album *Mali Music*, inspired by a trip he made to the country in support of the charity in 2002. This would be followed by a brief foray into international politics with the album *Democrazy*, which had been recorded in hotel rooms during the US portion of the tour for *Think Tank*, Blur’s seventh studio album, released in 2003.

The cultural climate of the previous decade had started to look tired and past its best. Publicly, an apathy had started to set in, as Blair’s tenure slowly and inevitably rolled round into Brown’s, and the memory of a Labour Party that truthfully represented the working-class vote in Britain faded to little more than a distant memory.

To answer the cultural vacuum that had been created, the younger generation would turn its attentions increasingly towards the past — a past beyond the Nineties, hailing a resurgence in the popularity of guitar bands, closer in appearance and sound to the musicians of the 1970s than the previous decade, in a trend that music writer Simon Reynolds terms “dyschronia” — a very specific strain of nostalgia for a future that was never fully realised. The rare few artists who emerged triumphant from these lost years, for example Amy Winehouse and Adele, would bank on this sense of chronological disjuncture. Emerging from the pubs and bars of Camden and east London and advertising their shows via the digital flyers that were shared on Myspace, their music riffed on the sounds of far older musicians such as the Ronettes and Sandy Shaw.

Grime presented the only real exception to this, but its ascent was far from straightforward and, to the extent that it was still largely maligned by the establishment, its wins were often outweighed by its setbacks. Dizzee Rascal’s 2003 Mercury Music Prize win was followed by wins for a number of bland, middle-of-the-road indie acts and Radio 2 fodder. While there was jubilation for Skepta’s win a whole thirteen years later, there was also an uncomfortable wince for the way that the industry was still touting the genre as “emerging”, fist-pumping the air with self-congratulation despite having failed to heed the call of its enormous fan base over a period of several decades. Journalist Chantelle Fiddy recounts a similar experience in an interview for *Inner City Pressure*. Talking about her experiences as a music journalist during the early 2000s, she claims:

> There's a core issue with many editors… They simply can't see past their own socio-economic background and class reference points. Pitching Wiley features to *Mixmag* in 2003, they'd say "no one has heard of him". Which was true, if you asked the attendees at Cream and Ministry of Sound, but if you walked through Mile End with him, he was a street demigod. It's narrow mindedness, and it perpetuates social division and the underachievement of any act not appealing to middle-class journalists.[37]

It's fair to say that grime now constitutes one of the main pop cultural strains in Britain, but not only has its trajectory to the top taken far longer and been far more fraught than almost all others, its eventual and hard-won success is now also being touted by the same industries that discriminated against it as a symbol of greater inclusion, whilst also distracting from the many ways in which these industries have otherwise become far more elitist. In what now looks like a fairly stark case of racial bias, and after the mainstream media's fairly unequivocal abandonment of garage by the mid-2000s, Mike Skinner would be the main profiteer of a genre built by black working-class voices. This isn't to render his contribution invalid, but instead to highlight the very limited and tokenistic concessions that were being made to the working-class voices of Britain during this time. Though the cultural output of the 1990s had undoubtedly favoured the white working class, garage and the slow emergence of UK rap had carried the promise of a more representative mainstream. That trend was reversed during the 2000s, characterised by a mawkish doubling down on the nationalist sentiment that had first been legitimated by Cool Britannia and which underscored the musical output of a generation of indie acts caricatured by the Libertines.

Nevertheless, Skinner did emerge as a valid voice of the working classes during this time, and I was grateful to him for lending something of a mythology to Birmingham and the people it contained, the piano sequence to “Has it Come to This?” becoming the theme to a million hours spent lounging in the park or in our friends’ back gardens. What marked him out from the generation that came before him was a sense of melancholy for the marginal existence into which he’d been plunged. This wasn’t the proud cry of a dole claimant who rejected the bigotry of Thatcherism and wanted to proudly elevate working-class culture in the way of Oasis, but a young man’s lament for having been stripped of all dignity, promise and respect. In this sense, Skinner was one of the first voices in pop culture that stood up and asked what was left for those who couldn’t seize on the limited opportunities afforded by Blair’s education reforms and programmes of social mobility.

Elsewhere, other emerging trends in pop culture included an irreverent, sharp strain of American writing. In the early 2000s, magazines like *VICE, Gawker* and *Nylon* created the wry voice that would come to define the language of the early internet. They were building on a tradition first started in the 1980s and 1990s by Brat Pack writers like Jay McInerney, whose novels found a new audience in this disillusioned and nihilistic generation. Nevertheless, there was a groundswell of people who were sharp and had ideas, who through the internet were building a new style of communication that brought together their critical sensibilities with a love and respect for the pop culture on which they’d been raised. This generation would inherit a climate of widespread scepticism towards the political class and the media, and, with greater opportunity at its fingertips, would begin experimenting with self-publishing and broadcasting. The internet obviously gave people from disparate places and communities the opportunity to converge and share ideas, as well as a chance to publish work without the support of the traditional middle men or cultural gatekeepers. Though it was a promise often built on illusion, and the narratives of popstars being discovered on Myspace were often little more than marketing myths dreamed up by record label bosses, the ability to publish online nevertheless gave young people the hope of being able to take back the reins. This, coupled with unprecedented levels of education, seemed to spell a new era of opportunity for people from low-income backgrounds living outside the well-trodden routes to success, of being able to create and publish work.

But the emergence of the internet as a route to self-determination had only started to fully materialise when the world stood on the brink of immense economic upheaval. It would leave millions of people rootless and without hope, including a generation comprised of a huge number of graduates who lacked the basic means with which to meaningfully seize on these new avenues available to them for the reason of having to prioritise survival. The “Class of 2009” faced a seventeen-year high in graduate unemployment[38], with the Higher Education Careers Service Unit reporting at the time that 1 in 10 graduates that year would be out of work, with many more in stop-gap work, such as bartending or waiting.[39] In the years that preceded the crash, many experts and spokespeople of a new cyberutopia had predicted that the internet would herald an explosion of transnational communication and collectivism of the free market and dot com variety, creating new avenues for enterprise and revenue. Few of them, however, had predicted the internet’s more common use in being the platform of the millennial’s lament. While some affluent young people, mainly contained within the Bay Area, might have used their private wealth funds to create tech start-ups and e-commerce brands, a far greater number would use it for the more nihilistic purpose of broadcasting thoughts about the realities of life under late capitalism.

This generation would often be characterised by the commentariat as lazy and apathetic, without realising that in reality it felt no affiliation to the political climate it had inherited, rather than a disillusionment with politics *per se*. With the Labour Party transformed into a Frankenstein's monster of a supposed opposition, the political class exposed as little more than shrewd marketeers, and the apparent fact that a war could be waged even in spite of mass uprisings, who could really blame these young people for feeling anything other than a sense of immense helplessness and despair?

The first glimmer of hope came with the student protests of November and December 2010. Held in response to proposals by the UK government to cut higher education spending and to raise the cap on student fees (specifically, they planned to triple university fees and to scrap the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) that had been providing students from the poorest backgrounds £30 a week to offset the financial strain of not being in full-time employment), the protests were also the first major articulation of resistance to the austerity programme that had been declared by then-Chancellor George Osborne in his June budget of that year. Those gathered were angry with the newly formed coalition government, whose cosignatory, the Deputy Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Democrats Nick Clegg, had pledged only months earlier to vote against any proposed increase in tuition fees as part of his general election campaign. The betrayal was stark, and symptomatic of a political class that lacked integrity and principle. Riding on the coattails of the cataclysmic financial crash, the protests built on the rising resentment towards the recklessness of the banking sector and the rampant consumerism and debt culture of older generations, but also the aggressive ideology that the Conservative-led coalition had employed in response. That these young people would not only be responsible for redressing the economic uncertainty they'd inherited, but also saddled with an unprecedented level of debt in order to attain the qualifications that were now presented as the customary means of entering the modern workplace — a modern workplace that was failing to provide an adequate number of real jobs — was a cacophony of injustice capable of finally obliterating their longstanding malaise.

In the short term, the efforts of the student protesters would prove in vain: in December that year, parliament voted to raise the ceiling on annual tuition fees in England to £9,000, a move that was widely adopted by most seats of further education in Britain, making it prohibitively expensive for many working-class applicants. This would mark the first of many policy decisions by the newly installed coalition government that showed an arrogant disregard for the vast majority of people living and working in Britain, including the now infamous bedroom tax, the denial of benefits to 165,000 disabled people and school cuts. With Labour dead in the water and their traditional voter base lacking any kind of real representation in parliament, the new coalition ran riot, feeling no pressure to appeal to the working class in the way that even Thatcher or John Major had.

Over the coming years, however, the movement that had started to form in the wake of the student protests would begin to snowball. In many ways it would set off a chain of events that were capable of eroding some, if not all, of the irony poisoning that had previously defined a generation, and it would be propelled by the teachings of an academic tradition heralded by the likes of Mark Fisher and Stuart Hall. In the first instance, it would do so largely unnoticed by the mainstream media, whose oversight would prove damaging to its lasting credibility and only exacerbate the sense of disconnect between this newly-energised youth and those in charge. This would pave the way for a grassroots media that was better equipped at reporting on the phenomena taking place under the radar of the metropolitan elites. Part of the problem was that in the wake of the financial crash, industries across the board — but specifically the media, which had always operated a level of unchecked nepotism — neglected to hire many young people from low-income backgrounds. And what many of us working at the edges of the industry knew and felt anecdotally would be vindicated by the number of false predictions made by the incumbent media in the years that followed.

For a few shrewd people present at the student protests, the events would not just prove symptomatic of a political order that was failing many people — not least *young* people — but they would also demonstrate the appetite that was emerging for a new era in politics, and a new era of information and culture. This is a story told with astute observation by Matt Myers, whose book *Student Revolt: Voices of the Austerity Generation* painstakingly traces the lineage from the student protests of 2010 to the enormous swell of support for Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 and beyond. Corbyn made the abolition of tuition fees a priority of his 2017 election campaign, a fact that's been credited with the twenty-five-year high in youth turnout. But fees had become a proxy of political attitudes, rather than the issue on which entire elections would hinge.

Many of those who contributed to Corbyn's success, including co-founder of the pro-Corbyn campaign group Momentum, James Schneider, and founder of challenger news outlet Novara Media, Aaron Bastani, had been present at the student protests, and built support for their respective causes through the communities that were forged there.[40] Momentum's aim was to circumvent resistance within the Parliamentary Labour Party, which sought to undermine the Corbyn leadership and impede its progress towards electoral success, by harnessing the huge swell of support for Corbyn on the ground. Using the internet as a means of reaching this support base and educating it on the procedural methods of the party, it aimed to affect wider, organisational change, including the election of local councillors and members of the party's various governing and steering committees. Novara, on the other hand, planned to install itself as a legitimate left-wing challenger to the British media, whose spectrum still largely only extends as far as the liberal centre-left.

In both cases, the style of delivery would be predicated on a sense of wit and incisiveness, making them relatable, but more importantly, exposing the Troy McClure technocrats at the steering wheel, as well as the psychological manipulation of advertisers and the biased agendas of even apparently neutral outlets such as the BBC. The legacy media would broadly respond by trying to mock and delegitimise these emergent new platforms and their spokespeople, denigrating them on the basis of obscurity and smugly seeking to lump them in with the same internet trolls who had propelled the right-wing cause in America, or the left-wing conspiracists over at *Skwawkbox* and the *Canary* — an argument essentially hinging on the fact that these outlets existed online, which would seem absurd to a generation who had grown up with the internet and viewed it as a fundamental part of everyday life.

In the run up to the 2017 general election, the legacy media made a grave mistake in underestimating just how far it had estranged the general public, and how hungry people were for an alternative. Its authority was no longer intact, and what supremacy it had once enjoyed was based on a monopoly model that the internet — with its infinite opportunity and abundance of information — had undermined. The print media in particular would misattribute its struggle solely to the internet's offering of more free stuff, without realising the very subtle but crucial difference: that it was easier for people to access a variety of different viewpoints and thereby judge the legacy media to be both deeply homogeneous and biased. While there might have been some truth to the legacy's media's claim on more rigorous editorial standards, its blind spots have also served to undermine this message. As the realities of austerity began to set in for working- and lower-middle-class people up and down the country, the establishment media would start to feel increasingly out of step.

In a study that was widely quoted by the British press in 2011, it was claimed that in the years that followed the economic crisis, a third of all

Brits found work through family connections and friends.[41] Education alone would not suffice in the modern workplace, but as the report's author was quoted as saying in a *Telegraph* writeup of the time, "In this tough climate it's essential to develop contacts and relationships in your chosen field whilst also bringing other skills to the workplace such as self-motivation, dedication and leadership qualities".[42] Nowhere was this more true than in the highly nepotistic media, and the implications were twofold. On the one hand, there was the very real fact of fewer job postings and a diminished transparency of hiring policies leading to fewer opportunities for working-class people. On the other, hiring policies were expanding to include a wider range of criteria, not just spanning the educational and experiential, but also relating to certain traits of personality, including confidence, sociability and networking abilities. On top of the education requirements that Blair had essentially stipulated as necessary for entering the modern workforce, applicants from working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds were also required to study the behaviours and vernacular of their middle- and upper-class peers, whose schooling and social background had furnished them with these skills.

In the ultra-competitive climate borne of the media and creative industries' tightened purse strings post-2008, it would be the stories and output of the people who most effectively embodied these traits that would prevail. The outlets declaring themselves to be the chief oppositional force in the war against misinformation and fake news often failed to see their own limitations and biases. As the true horror of austerity started to unfold, leading to unprecedented hardship defined by rising homelessness, joblessness, hunger, poverty and a mental health crisis, the cultural climate of Britain had never looked so wealthy or posh, doubling down on storytelling set squarely within the middle-class experience, the aristocracy and the entrepreneurial class. This belied a huge amount of suffering that was being experienced by the poorest in society, little of which would ever find its way onto TV or into the mainstream media, but which the internet was doing a great job of surfacing nevertheless. Meanwhile, in would step a new era of models, musicians, actors, writers, fashion designers and artists who were blue-blooded and proud. Kate Moss' Croydonite "Get the London Look" — the line used in Rimmel ads post-Cool Britannia — would be replaced by Cara Delevingne's far plummier version, which would steadily become the norm, with working-class models such as Jourdan Dunn emerging as outliers in an industry predominated by privately-educated elites. Meanwhile, the Nineties figure of the posh anomaly, typified by Hugh Grant, would become the model for a new generation of actors, including Benedict Cumberbatch, Eddie Redmayne and Tom Hiddleston, who became inescapable during the 2010s. Likewise, the world of theatre would largely abandon any efforts to democratise, positing Polly Stenham as the voice of young London, despite her being the heir to Unilever millions and a graduate of the twelve-grand-a-term Wycombe Abbey girls school. Festival line-ups would steadily replace a broad church of weird, working-class Nineties bands and those few grime artists who in the early days were able to break through to make some headway in the mainstream — Wiley, Dizzee and Lethal Bizzle, for example — with Florence and the Machine, Mumford & Sons and the Maccabees (whose members include an Orlando, Felix, Rupert and Hugo). Under the blue-blooded auspices of David Cameron and his acolytes, and following the flagrant abandonment of the working classes by the Liberal Democrats and the centrist factions within the Labour Party, the wealthy elites were given carte blanche to flaunt their culture, almost to the derision and mockery of everyone else. Gone was the shame of being posh that bands such as Blur had suffered under.

Kill All Normies has over-simplfied the trajectory of cyperutopianism by focusing solely on the culture wars of Trump's America and highlighting the fatal lack of leadership and central ownership of online movements from Occupy to the Arab Spring. But rather than being characterised by a swell of online vigilantes, both Momentum and Novara harnessed the internet for strategic gains in order to circumnavigate an increasingly monocultural media. In retaliation, the legacy media has often seized on a narrative whose limitations Nagle's own analysis also falls victim to, focussing solely on a very particular, right-wing strain of online political organisation and dissemination of ideas. Nagle goes on to state that as the old media dies:

> gatekeepers of cultural sensibilities and etiquette have been overthrown, [and] notions of popular taste maintained by a small creative class are now perpetually outpaced by viral online content from obscure sources, and cultural industry consumers have been replaced by constantly online, instant content producers.[43]

While it would be hard to deny this shift in audience models, and the fact that the internet has irrevocably changed the face of creativity and cultural output across the world, this assessment is still too strong. The establishment gatekeepers are rattled, but at the time of writing, their success in seeking to undermine these new challengers must also not be underestimated. The legacy media will continue to peddle the myth of its superior quality compared with the citizen outlets emerging online for the purposes of justifying its continued existence and perpetuation of the status quo; and while we as consumers must remain vigilant to the funding models and ethical standards of any new emerging outlet, we must remain equally vigilant of these campaigns made by the legacy media to discredit any challenger.

What became increasingly apparent during the 2010s was how far the media had become complicit in the politics of neoliberalism, its gatekeepers hailing from an ever diminishing pool whose interests were largely served by the status quo and who lacked the vested interest to oppose it. The turnout of young voters to elect Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour Party in 2015, and then re-elect him a year later, was confirmation that their appetite to engage with the issues and policy decisions affecting the whole of society had been reignited. And to continue the strain of theoretical analysis that many had first been exposed to at university, they would require a media that was willing to interrogate the structural factors governing society, rather than a media that served as a complicit extension of them.

The internet would prove to be both one of the means, and a way of measuring, the extent of this younger generation's newfound "wokeness" — a term that has latterly been ascribed so much derision as to become almost meaningless, but which in the first instance did well to characterise the millions of mainly young people who had cut their teeth on academic theory of the post-structural and post-colonial variety. There was a sense that the veil had been lifted: pacifism and anti-imperialism would no longer be marginal causes championed exclusively by minority communities who stood to gain the most from abolishing structural racism and elitism; dusty intellectuals; and your one jangling aunty who lived on the south coast. Instead, they would become the cornerstone of a generation determined to do things differently. More crucial than the fact that more young people than ever before sought higher education, was the fact that they were now using it not just to add to their CV, as was intended by Blair, but to further their understanding of society, culture and politics, with a view to improving and shaping it for the better.

The capitalist thinking of the preceding two decades had dictated that more people than ever before would pursue education not merely for economic purposes, but to fulfil some greater, moral obligation and sense of duty. It was easy for those in government, and even an older generation, to continue perpetuating the myth of education as a means to success and prosperity — and to use this to justify the hike in fees. But those on the ground had been forced, through the indignity of putting themselves through the stress and financial burden of university, only to wind up broke and jobless, to confront the limitations of that logic. It would be them, armed with their newly-attained powers of deduction and critique, who would begin to analyse their mounting anger and interrogate the systems that had led to their limited fates. Meanwhile, the transformation of British culture into a who’s who of public school alumni was the backdrop against which a decade of unparalleled hardship and austerity was wrought, adding insult to injury for the millions who suffered, and demonstrating unequivocally that their kind would only ever be permitted providing it serve the interests of the upper classes. As I will detail more in the following chapter, it was a decade which will be largely forgotten for its cultural output, which was largely insipid and dull, but which belied a rising current of resentment and anger, from which one of the most exciting and revolutionary periods in British politics would ultimately emerge. The intellectual strain that had not only informed the student protests but been cemented by the meeting of minds which happened there, would far outlive the student protest occupation of the Tory Party HQ at Millbank Tower.

The Problem with Tastefulness*

The ten years since the global economic crash of 2008 happened to coincide almost exactly with my twenties. If these were the years in which I was meant to start forming meaningful and lasting relationships, in which I started to apply my skills to better understand the kind of contribution I could make to the world around me — most importantly, if these were meant to be the years in which I started to take on greater responsibility and finally outgrow the vagaries of adolescence in order to achieve self-determination, contentedness and a solid sense of who I was — then they would fall far short of expectation.

Almost all of my friends who entered the job market at this time report a very different experience. Among the many highs and lows, the periods of depression, the moving between decrepit flats in an unregulated rental market, the break-ups, the career struggles, and the few moments of intense jubilation when our ambitions didn't seem altogether doomed, it became difficult to see what was the result of global financial trends, personal failing, or a combination of the two. The one fact that always selfishly soothed me was knowing that I wasn't alone. With me were millions of other young, hungry and ambitious people, who had faced the sharp end of the free market's butterfly effect and felt frustrated by the large-scale forces of late capitalism, and the government policies implemented by the Conservative-led coalition, during what is now being termed the Lost Decade.

For many of us who entered the workplace in or around 2008, there was a feeling of having been sold a lie. That feeling was partly attributable to the global economic downturn, but it was exacerbated by a cultural climate that seemed to neglect the experiences of the majority suffering under austerity, for the sake of prioritising the narratives and cultural output of a more affluent elite. Detractors will argue that the fields of art and entertainment have always been incidental to the economy and therefore a luxury of the few who could afford to pursue them as careers. But as I have already argued, far from being incidental to it, both play a crucial role in the proper functioning of a democratic society, serving a crucial role in the formation of identity and the processes of self-determination.

The short answer as to why all this was happening was an aversion to risk. As market forces dictated that industries across the board became more risk-averse, minimising controversy and being more amenable to audiences might have seemed like straightforward business sense. But the values on which these judgements were being made can never be divorced from class. After all, how can you quantify risk in relation to something as intangible and subjective as our creative tastes? The answer, at least according to those in charge during the lost decade, was by eliminating the social outliers whose viewpoints differed from the vast majority of people steering the ship. What this meant, in real terms, was that while the majority white, majority middle-class gatekeepers of the creative industries might have more readily permitted working-class and minority voices — as well as their stories and ideas — during the boom periods of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, they quickly reverted to type when faced with economic uncertainty, doubling down on the “safe” and easily marketable output of their peers.

In the meantime however, the working classes had been on the move, or at least left the house, reached the end of the road and been told to turn back. The myth of social mobility had stopped short of allowing them to have any meaningful impact on the avenues of culture, academia or government, and while the economic downturn might have created the basis on which to further justify a culture of unpaid internships and low-paid entry-level jobs, there was the added fact of these industries also having historic roots in nepotism and class discrimination. Take for example the fact that in my time as a journalist I have watched as the editorial teams of even the most seemingly progressive and anti-establishment magazines became increasingly composed of privately educated, middle-to-upper-class people, able to survive on their paltry salaries thanks to the Bank of Mum and Dad. Scratch beneath the surface some more, and you quickly uncover an attitude that believes this survival mechanism to be valid, on the grounds that many of its founders and editors themselves hail from similar economic backgrounds.

If New Labour had hoped that in addition to answering an immediate economic question, their education reforms might also lead to a more diverse and energised middle class to supplant the old, then their dreams have fallen far short of expectation. What we have instead is a better-educated working and lower-middle class still constrained by social, economic and cultural inequality. Smart, critical and angry, they would mount the first real existential threat in several decades to the country's entrenched class hierarchies, and continue to antagonise and disrupt the political order with the very real hope of engendering change.

By 2017, the elected leader of this young and somewhat re-energised youth contingent, Jeremy Corbyn, would deliver an election campaign that sent shockwaves through the British establishment, giving it serious cause to believe that substantial and existential change was afoot. The anger that had been mounting since the previous decade, and which had few other mainstream avenues for expression, would finally be played out in the electoral gains made by the Labour Party in the general election of that year. Corbyn's earlier election to the leadership of the party had been described as unexpected, and unpredicted, without any thought for what this said about the state of the media. Clearly, a whopping great portion of the electorate was not being served by its purposes, primarily on account of how few working- and lower-middle-class voices had been permitted entry and free rein to communicate their ideas in the years since austerity had first been imposed.

Much of the support for Corbyn was expressed via social media, a fact that newspaper journalists gleefully wielded as proof of its marginality while failing to recognise how far it served to reveal their own biases (again, we witnessed a snobbery towards the internet — the *de facto* medium of real, and of course *younger*, people everywhere). The legacy media continued to assert its superior quality — a claim that went beyond the straightforward assertion that broadsheet journalists are simply held to a higher level of editorial scrutiny, to also subtly imply their superior intellect and judgement; and it was a claim that would seem increasingly hubristic with every false election prediction.

It was the arrogance with which these commentators continued to promulgate their righteousness, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that contributed to a growing disdain for the broadsheet commentariat and legacy news media. Any claim of being democratic, when it had shouted over and discredited the views of almost half the electorate, would help to serve the final death knell in its historic claim on superior quality. Clearly something was amiss. In trying to dissect why this had been allowed to happen, I spent a lot of time talking to and reading the output of today’s centrist and liberal commentariat, in order to better understand its motivations and perspectives. For most, hailing from affluent parts of London and having graduated from expensive schools, the call of journalism and centre-left politics seems to have been a radical decision within their immediate social circles, leading to a tendency among liberal-leaning journalists, who I’ve met, to reward themselves for not having pursued the more lucrative avenues of finance or law, for example — as if this alone rectified their privilege and bias. It's this righteousness that goes some way to explaining the false sense of proximity that many of these commentators also feel to the marginalised experiences of the working classes. What's more, with the decline of local journalism, and journalism as a trade, the dynamics of reporting have shifted, so that issues once covered by local correspondents with a close and intimate understanding — issues caused by austerity, for example — are being presented instead through the third-hand, vouyeristic lens of a small group of liberal media types largely contained within London. This is being further exacerbated by the fact that, with smaller budgets and tighter deadlines, fewer journalists are actually engaging in social anthropology, qualitative research or participant observation, and instead are applying theory learned from books to scenarios which they largely glean from third-party reports conducted by NGOs or similar.

This same self-righteousness that defines the liberal media also creates a culture in which it's acceptable for them to breed contempt for poorer people who *did* respond to the call of social mobility in a bid to escape poverty and struggle. I can't imagine there are many people reading this who feel sympathy for ex-Etonians occupying trading floors, but there will be many, I hope, who sympathise with the pull of a white-collar job for a working-class person wanting to obtain the same sense of security as those who were born into wealth. These motivations can never be separated from the circumstances of late capitalism as exacerbated under successive governments, nor the fact that few well-paid blue-collar and public sector jobs exist. And yet the short shrift given to these people, exemplified by the widely-mocked, upwardly mobile candidates we see on shows such as *The Apprentice*, under the sardonic gaze of a media class that fails to see its own place in an unequal system — and fails to realise that the opportunity to pursue a career in the media at the expense of other industries is itself a luxury — constitutes a glaring hypocrisy. In this sense, it is often capitalism's greatest profiteers who are permitted to be most vocal about its shortcomings, and often in their very narrow worldview which places them front and centre of the class struggle, they end up flatly lumping under the same umbrella the old boy networks and the hungry upstarts looking to take advantage of the few avenues available to them for social mobility; unfairly castigating the latter for their vulgarity and stupidity.

In the Reagan and Thatcher model, professional success and financial attainment offered a possible route of redemption to those born outside of the entrenched and elitist methods of private and university education, even if our media continued to mock those who seized on its opportunities for their arrogant desire in wanting to have a larger share of the same pie. Under Blair, mobility and education became interchangeable. On the one hand this was a noble enterprise to give working-class children the same opportunities to learn as any of their middle-to-upper-class peers. But with it came an added dimension to the class struggle, one that stipulated the necessity of also being book-smart, demure and cognisant of the rules of taste that had also been defined by the establishment.

It is difficult to argue this point because of the success of the liberal project in asserting the unequivocal benefits of academic education. While I wholeheartedly believe that it is right for all people to have the same access to, and opportunities of, education, irrespective of their financial profile, I also believe that in the British context at least this has been skewed more towards the attainment of human capital, rather than being an end in and of itself. It is an imperative of a punitive class system, rather than a freedom or a choice. Higher education and cultural immersion might constitute something more valuable than straightforward wealth creation, but we would be fooling ourselves if we didn't also accept that the former is in many ways equally driven by capitalist thinking. The pursuit of education for little more than adding to your CV or Linkedin profile, and to achieve the cultural signifiers of wealth and cultural cachet, is equivalent to any other form of status symbol and forms part of a capitalist value system. And by the same logic, entrepreneurialism without any of the subtle signifiers of education and high culture affords you only a slightly higher place on the social ladder than the council estate “chav” of previous decades.

The liberal bohemian, whose relatively comfortable existence affords them the opportunity, is often the worst culprit for deriding the “crass” efforts of a group forced, through historic oppression and struggle, to more frequently and explicitly participate in the capitalist system. Consider, for a second, how it feels to be derided by a liberal media class largely born into wealth, for seizing on the opportunities open to you, and to be mocked for not quite understanding the subtle idiosyncrasies and signifiers of middle-class “good taste”. The problem with tastefulness is that it is often posited as definitive and absolute, when in reality it is little more than a proxy for wider socio-economic dynamics. Those in the business of deciding what constitutes taste — again, the gatekeepers of our collective culture including publishers, broadcasters, editors and music industry bosses — are acting in the service of those dynamics, and constitute the cultural outposts of a much bigger campaign to uphold the ideals of the middle-class. Most of what is judged to be beautiful, important, moving or intriguing will have been decided under circumstances that sought to censor and deride the experiences of low earners, for the purposes of upholding the logic and imperatives of social mobility. It’s the smug grin of those initiated into the British establishment writ large on the pages of the books we read, the TV shows we watch and the music we hear on the radio.

It is here that we begin to see how universally applicable the famous Susan Sontag adage is — that *rules of taste enforce structures of power*. Taste, rather than being incidental to class, is the means by which reigning elites protect themselves — a hegemonic tool used to oppress and stifle any outside challenger. In Britain, in spite of a mild flirtation in previous decades with something more representative, taste has become increasingly judged by its proximity to the middle-class status quo, and by default, remains antithetical to anything culturally divergent. It is also a means of ensuring that the status quo is never challenged. Dress sense, interior design sensibility and cultural reference points all have the power to circumnavigate someone's financial profile to grant them approval to the upper echelons of society. Crucially, it isn't just wealth, but wealth coupled with a sound understanding of the subtle signifiers of the establishment, that now serves as a guarantee of social acceptance. As a result, we begin to see how taste serves as a proxy for submission; an external indicator of how far an individual is willing to be subsumed by the pervasive modes of power, and play the game of incremental class ascension.

By reverse, and to expose the shallow veneer of respectability that has been used to conceal policies and ideas that are both cruel and harmful to many people, we require art and culture that is permitted the freedom to flout good taste. We require art and culture that at times is allowed to go to extremes, to reflect the extremes that are felt by those communities who are not served by the present system, and who suffer under the effects of late capitalism and austerity.

I started to consider this phenomenon specifically in relation to books and publishing, which had always been the main focus of my critical attention as a journalist. There have been few books published in the past decade that I would consider to be controversial, challenging or dangerous. What has replaced them is a literary culture increasingly predicated on the idea of tastefulness. We have seen an explosion in the number of artfully-written memoirs, each presented in an array of photogenic, peach or "millennial pink"-coloured dust jackets and containing the quiet, internal struggles of their affluent authors and protagonists. This has arisen concurrently with trends in literary fiction circles around London, which I have engaged with to varying extents, whose authors are each striving for a nadir in cleanly-written prose, exquisite phraseology and well-executed pauses.

While there had always been a core degree of fetishisation towards these poetic and literary tropes, the trend has started to pervade the mainstream publishing industry in a way that we have never seen before; and yet, the ideas and subjects that these groups discuss would be largely impenetrable to anyone without a master's degree in creative writing, whipping the wider publishing industry into a culture of ever-more obscure stakes. While the leading lights of literary fiction in the 1990s and even early 2000s had included the likes of Douglas Coupland, Irvine Welsh, Donna Tartt, Bret Easton Ellis and Zadie Smith — writers whose purview and focus was always very clear, and whose narratives were always compelling to a broad readership — their contemporary equivalents have mired themselves in a degree of introspection and literary stylistics that alienates almost anyone outside of the immediate, literary fray. Without naming names and isolating any one particular author, hardly any of the literary world's leading lights today can claim to have achieved the same era-defining prominence and pop-cultural breakthrough as any of these earlier literary stars. And yet the publishing industry seems hardly to care about creating work with broad appeal or the ability to provoke, providing the middle-class consumer base allows it to meet its annual performance targets.

Much has been made by the publishing industry of the rise in book sales in recent years, but while we are seeing a trend towards the wider consumption of books, few of them are having the same mainstream impact as any one of the main titles written by those authors who rose to prominence in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. What we're seeing instead is a culture of Instagram posts and effusive Twitter reviews, which leads to a wider number of authors enjoying a moderate degree of success, rather than any one of them achieving popular status. It is an idea that sounds naive and idealistic now on account of how readily the publishing industry has accepted its fate as a marginal entity, whose responsibility is to serve the quiet, tasteful sensibilities of its middle-class readership — that the novelty value into which books and reading has been plunged represents one of the saddest parts of our cultural decline. Thanks to the twee picture painted by today's publishing enthusiasts — "Curled up on the sofa with the latest Rachel Cusk!" — literature has become increasingly reframed as a lifestyle choice and pastime of the wealthy, rather than a valid means by which to convey important ideas.

Like several other aspects of our collective culture, reading has also become largely depoliticized and stripped of any militancy. This is because the publishing industry is more aware of its own mortality post-2008, and, as a result, keen to distract from the systems of elitism under which it operates. It is therefore less likely to engage with work that openly critiques or satirises the establishment, and therefore gives cause for any kind of real introspection. Work that is produced by the white middle classes is forced to become ever more tepid and non-partisan for the purposes of avoiding any close inspection of the credentials and biases of its authors. Meanwhile, the publishing industry confidently produces large volumes of work on subjects that it judges to be at a safe enough distance so as not to invite any true interrogation of its own power structures. The touristic mentality of the middle class is brought to bear in the wide range of books produced every year which focus on the experiences of people living under corrupt regimes in the global south, for example, but which rarely touch on the problematic dynamics of Western foreign policy, aid, white saviour complexes, the inhuman conditions that refugees are subjected to, or any of the quiet vestiges of imperialism from which the publishing industry no doubt profits. Where is the great novel detailing the use of foodbanks? Certainly not in the literary salons being held by the *White Review* or in the halls of the ICA.

I made this point in an article that actually served as the basis for this book. Writing in 2018 about the state of publishing for London-based, independent music and culture platform the *Quietus*, I referred to three books written by women of colour: *Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward, *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman and *Home Fire* by Kamila Shamsie. All three books are great, but it was the dynamics of their publication and the very particular response from the publishing industry during an award ceremony in which they were being lauded, that seemed glaringly out of line with the evening's ostensible celebration of a more diverse, and incisive publishing landscape.

I wrote then that:

> Writers of colour are producing such sheer volumes of critical work at the moment that it only serves to highlight the real paucity of novels dedicated to honestly exploring the excesses, limitations and emergent, narcissistic horrors that exist in the more entrenched and privileged corners of white culture. It also highlights a tendency in publishing to focus its attention outwards, and avoid introspection about the cultural milieu in which it sits. All of this contributes to a fairly uncomfortable dynamic in which the predominantly white, predominantly middle-class gatekeepers of the publishing industry — who have always belonged to a social strata several rungs above the characters whose "raw portrayal" they clasp their hearts and gush over — reward themselves for having delivered critical social commentary.

I had initially pitched to the *Quietus* a review of the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by American author Ottessa Moshfegh, but editor Luke Turner felt that the pitch seemed to encompass more than a single book review. To explain why this was, I should probably begin by explaining what had prompted me to pitch the review in the first place. Not being a professional book reviewer, I usually only review books that elicit a strong reaction in me, be that negative or positive. In the case of Moshfegh it was the latter. I liked *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* for all the reasons you are not meant to like a book. Or to put it more precisely, I didn't *like* the book, but that didn't stop me having a strong appreciation for what it had achieved.

For starters, I hated its protagonist, a single twenty-something living in Manhattan at the turn of the century and narcissistic in the extreme, on top of which, the plot was maddeningly repetitive and the stakes so low as to seem almost farcical — essentially hinging on whether or not its nameless protagonist, who we all despise anyway, will ever succeed in acquiescing to eternal sleep through a cocktail of drugs prescribed by her therapist. Despite the frustration it aroused in me, and despite hating everything about its central character, I admired Moshfegh for creating a novel that didn't prioritize readability, or appealing to the tepid tastes of today's reading class — a novel that critically explored and mimicked in its style and delivery, the self-absorption of the middle classes, the torrid levels of solipsism and the protagonists' ignorance towards the feelings of other people. Here, it seemed, were the worst parts of the affluent laid bare, and yet I couldn't escape the fact that in almost fifteen years of being an avid reader, this was the first time I could remember a book achieving such an effect, and feeling anger for the fact that the pervasive rules of taste had prevented these themes from being surfaced.

In the past I've received a lot of criticism for celebrating the work of Bret Easton Ellis, and specifically *American Psycho.* It is a fairly unpopular thing to do among my peer group, who largely ascribe *American Psycho* to the dustbin of history on account of Ellis' personal views, which in the last few years (and, at the time of writing, the last few days) have been exposed as racist, xenophobic and sexist. In his recent interviews for the *Times* and the *New Yorker* — and in his book entitled *White* — he talked about his experiences of oppression as a white male, whilst railing against PC culture, millennials, black women and social media.[44] The debate over whether we can still appreciate the work of people who have been personally — or not so personally, in the case of his book *White* — exposed as problematic is one for another time, but whatever conclusions we might draw, I believe that most criticisms of *American Psycho* at least take a fairly superficial view, chastising it for the actions of its protagonist, without any notion of the more fundamental criticisms it seeks to make. While I am strongly opposed to the maimed-woman trope of popular horror films for gratuitously perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and somewhat fetishizing rape culture, in Ellis' book the violence against women is paramount to the creation of his Reaganite monster. Without it, Bateman wouldn't terrify us in the way that we needed him to in order expose the underlying violence and cruelty of unabated capitalism. It is why, in spite of Ellis' own personal descent into many of the tendencies associated with the worst aspects of capitalist thinking, I find myself coming back to *American Psycho* time and time again, and to a lesser extent even *Glamorama* and *Less Than Zero*, as important works of satire. Bateman is, after all, nothing more than a simulacrum of market trends, a vessel via which goods are traded and trends determined. He exists insofar as he earns and consumes, a fact most vividly distilled in the now widely quoted line, "I simply am not there", echoing *Less than Zero*'s earlier "disappear here". And yet in this regard he represents all of us, to varying extents functioning as economic entities — bodies floating on the market economy, valuable only to the extent that we can turn ourselves into cash. Like anyone, I of course recoiled from the scenes of violence that *American Psycho* recounts, but also the pedantic level of detail (a deliberate ploy by Ellis to not just *relay* Bateman's advanced egoism, but to evoke it through one of the most powerful examples of mimesis anywhere in literature). As I argued in the *Quietus* article, satire never works by halves, and just as it took Jonathan

Swift to propose eating babies to expose the abhorrent stranglehold of Britain over Ireland and the shortcomings of modern economics, and Valerie Solanas to suggest eradicating men to expose the failings of patriarchy, so it took Bret Easton Ellis to unleash a homicidal maniac on to the streets of New York to finally burst the perception of Reagan-Thatcher's proto-Mondeo Man. As a book, *American Psycho* doesn't just detail the life of a tasteless man, it is in and of itself an assault on good taste — a skewer to the polite intellectualism of the reading class and an invitation, finally, for it to confront the structures of power in which it operates. The hill, apparently, that I am destined to die on is that Patrick Bateman represents one of the most effective satirical constructs anywhere in literature, his creation almost singlehandedly transforming public perceptions of the arch-capitalist from one of upstanding moral citizen to unhinged, demonic maniac. Never again would we look at a man in a pinstripe suit in quite the same way.

Depiction is not endorsement, and it is possible to hold the view that art should exist relatively unconstrained by moral values in order to make its point, while also maintaining a politics that are staunchly progressive and inclusive. We should also have enough faith in our cultural gatekeepers to be able to decide on that which is gratuitous and offensive, and that which is meaningful and potentially satirical, without having to limit art to hard and fast rules of morality. Perhaps more than anything else, the fact that this morality in art has become so pervasive, suggests that our respect for the cultural gatekeepers has been lost.

My point in writing the *Quietus* article, then, was that in over a decade of reading, for the first time I'd encountered a book that came close to achieving the same kind of incisive cultural commentary as *American Psycho*. And while Moshfegh's book is no match for Ellis', and its satire is somewhat compromised by the books' fairly sentimental ending, in a world of otherwise tepid literature that seems continually to miss the mark of skewering the affluent and the privileged, it stood out.

After the piece was published I started to think more deeply about the reasons for the paucity of work that truly challenged our rules of taste. I spoke off the record with a senior journalist at the *Guardian* about the state of publishing and tried to persuade him of the merits of Moshfegh's book. For all the reasons outlined above, I was willing to stick my neck out and challenge the somewhat plainer tastes of my companion. The *Observer* had published one flattering write-up of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, but again, the newspaper failed to see its own place in the society that Moshfegh critiqued, characterising it instead as a squarely state-of-America novel, rather than a broad thesis on the elitism and excesses of the establishment, the self-indulgence of the middle classes, and the cultural rot to which it was destined.

But the journalist I spoke to was unconvinced. He told me that he was no longer interested in reading books that were offensive "for the sake of it", without any thought for how the rules of offensiveness were continually being renegotiated. The conversation raised an important question in my mind about who decides artistic merit, and how some have the power to instantly dismiss — and thereby delegitimize — art that they judge to be a little too close to the bone.

As much as the publishing industry relies on sales in order to survive, and needs to continue publishing work that is broadly appealing to a large number of people, it is also responsible for interrogating the rules of taste that we accept as a society — whose ethical credentials can never be assumed. It shouldn't just be playing to the crowd, but challenging, goading and directing it. As society shifts, so the values we've taken as definitive need to be reassessed to ensure that they reflect who we all are as people, and what we want to achieve as a society. To do so, art must be permitted the freedom to reflect the worst sides of ourselves. Shocking people in this sense isn't always gratuitous, but a necessary means for challenging our most deeply held assumptions about the world we live in. *Are these ideas relevant anymore? Are they actually, inherently, detrimental to certain communities and demographics?* Grotesquery, violence, extremity and anger have — since the earliest morality plays through to Shakespeare and Jacobean drama, Victorian gothic and some of the greatest works of postmodern literature — played an essential role in helping us to answer these questions and formed a necessary means by which to measure our values as a society. And their exclusion from a culture that has become increasingly predicated on the sterile good taste of a middle class increasingly terrified of having its precarious power structures exposed is an assault on all of us.

By making this argument, I don't mean to align myself with the steady plod of greying male writers currently lamenting the deterioration of culture, including the likes of Ellis, of course, but also Will Self, Ben Elton, Ricky Gervais, Graham Linehan, and many others — with their facile analysis amounting to the accusation that identity politics has ruined everything. Identity politics has, at times, been guilty of precluding the intersecting factor of class, but it has also overwhelmingly served to reduce the harmful effects of unabated bigotry. We should all be welcoming the arrival of a new era in cultural output that prevents these old men from running amok, switching from valid social satire and commentary in some instances at the beginning of their careers, to attacking anyone who challenges their godlike authority and freedom to *say* and *do* whatever they want as soon as they attain some degree of success.

The problem stems from the fact that the legacy media has, on occasion, exploited movements in identity politics to divert attention away from, and prevent any direct attacks on, its own entrenched elitism and classism.

Author Irvine Welsh admitted to me in 2016 that he didn't think *Trainspotting* would be published in the current climate. That book, which depicted heroin addiction in the poverty-stricken areas of Leith, outside of Edinburgh, represented a level of candour and explicit violence that is no longer permitted by the incumbent gatekeepers of the publishing industry, whose flawed reading might see the book as glamourising drug consumption. It's perhaps obvious, but bears stating, *that censoring these subjects doesn't remove them from society*. Whatever fashionable connotations might have been interpreted by Ewan McGregor in his portrayal of Mark Renton in the film adaptation, *Trainspotting* was a necessary piece of social commentary that made a scalding attack on the socioeconomic conditions created by Thatcherism. Tacit in the "Choose Life" speech now immortalised in the final scene of the Danny Boyle film and the image of McGregor's frenzied run as Underworld's "Born Slippy" reaches its crescendo, is the idea that the foundations of support for the working classes had been eradicated completely, and that the only recourse would be fortuitous escape to the middle class. There's a tragic irony in McGregor looking us square in the eye and saying that he's going to be:

> just like us: the fucking big television. The washing machine, the car, the compact disc and electric tin opener… mortgage, starter home, leisure wear, luggage, three piece suite, DIY, game shows, junk food… good at golf, washing the car, choice of sweaters, family Christmas, indexed pension, tax exemption, clearing gutters, getting by, looking ahead, the day you die.

This isn't an inventory for an idyllic new life, but a list of hypocrisies latent in the middle-class existence, which while amounting to something substantially better than a life of heroin addiction, can make no real claim to being anything other than endless consumerism and keeping up with the Joneses. It is a stroke of satire that perfectly encapsulates the nature of modern Britain, the like of which has not been seen in the mainstream for several decades.

What few concessions the mainstream media *does* make towards allowing discussion of riskier subjects is done in such a way as to arguably harm these causes more than if they were ignored altogether. That's because, in the desperate need to package everything within the very narrow parameters of good taste, issues that are infused with anger and rage are mollified and made puny, stripped of the intensity that is required for them to make any meaningful headway in transforming society to become more equal and progressive. But anger is not the same as hate, and the establishment media has tactically conflated the two in order to eliminate any challenge to its authority. The legitimate efforts to stamp out hate speech and bigotry have also been used as the auspices under which to usher in an uncritical era of pop culture. Pleasing an audience of affluent, middle-class culture-vultures who seek to pride themselves on having a very superficial understanding of the "key issues" of the day has come at the expense of producing writing that speaks with any authenticity and to the people whose lives these issues actually touch. Writing that would have traditionally fallen under the rubric of experimental literary fiction, polemic or pulp has either been erased, or at best supplanted, by the literary equivalent of a *Panorama* episode, coldly relaying the oddities of these cultures in a way that solicitors up and down the country can understand and comfortably talk about over the dinner table, or else packaging them in the way of a Richard Curtis movie: risqué and giggle-inducing. Editors, curators, publishers and music industry bosses working in the service of market forces and conforming to an ever narrower target audience are more concerned with meeting the demands of what's digestible according to the status quo, favouring distant academic abstraction, or that uncomfortable tongue-in-cheek delivery, over the more torrid renditions that were far more frequently found in the "transgressive" literature, art, music and journalism of the preceding decades.

Kathy Acker once wrote that Andy Warhol had made it OK to be queer.[45] She was referring of course to the fact that Warhol's work shocked, thereby challenging existing rules of taste and allowing the trans, gay and bi people he called his friends not just to feel accepted but to have a greater degree of agency in shaping mainstream culture and the collective values of a generation. I don't particularly like Warhol or his legacy of exploiting people to further his own celebrity, but I include his example to highlight the fact that he made cultural inroads by virtue of being controversial. He didn't transform Western culture by writing something in the vein of so many of today's pop-feminist or similar political "manifestos", explaining in jocular, broadsheet-friendly terms the finer details of his friends amphetamine addictions and sex lives for the purposes of appeasing the middle classes. But, with the exception of a rare few outliers, such as writer Reni Eddo-Lodge, whose polemic *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* made one of the rare, direct and unapologetic affronts to the mainstream establishment in recent years, as well as Jordan Peele, whose films, including *Get Out*, have achieved similar gains within the movie industry, this is precisely what even our most experimental culture looks like today, feeding middle-class caricatures of a youth culture, as well as a plethora of social issues, that few on the ground actually recognise. The mainstream media can wield any number of works detailing the experiences of trans people, for example, as proof of its progressive and inclusive agenda, but where has the anger gone? The rage and the despair? Where are the Derek Jarmans? The Leigh Bowerys? The Grace Joneses? Where are the artists like Keith Flint and Tricky, who crept onto our TV screens and terrorised our mums? Against everything, these artists made inroads into pop culture, shaping and expanding the horizons of the British public. Where is even our equivalent of George Michael — a popstar whose provocations to the homophobic entertainment industry and media, and the political statements that he made during TV interviews, seem strangely unthinkable to us in the current climate? In the pervasive and ever more limited rules of tastefulness that now reign supreme, even these once celebrated attendants of pop culture would not be permitted — and it is this that is increasingly contributing to the internet, for good or bad, becoming the real terrain of today's culture wars, rather than the tired establishment routes whose tyrannical constraints prevent anything meaningful and authentic from ever being expressed.

Broadly speaking, though not in all cases, these challengers to the mainstream also hailed from low-income backgrounds. As I've already argued, the elitist risk-aversion that set in post-2008 has therefore not only created a cultural climate that is unrepresentative, but by eliminating working-class vernacular art and storytelling — made vivid by its struggle and its urgency — also created a cultural climate of the most prosaic and unremarkable kind. Identity politics have played an important role in recent years in helping millions of people live a more complete, honest and truthful life, and allowed many more people than ever before to feel more accepted by society. But any effort to promote greater inclusivity that neglects to consider how race, gender, sexuality and disability intersect with class, is incomplete. For most people, the prejudices faced on account of any factor of identity will be intimately connected with the poor conditions they face at work, their interactions with customers when working in the hospitality industry, for example, and their reliance on bureaucratic systems that the middle classes are able to buy their way out of. Therefore, any effort to mainstream a more inclusive attitude towards any one of these factors of identity must also require us to consider them through this socio-economic lens.

The type of sponsored event championing various issues of identity politics that we've seen explode in recent years — usually hosted in the exhibition halls of Somerset House and attended by a core strain of magazine and PR person living in London — sadly won't achieve this, and only constitutes a complex version of the dreaded advertorial, or similar. What's more, it has seemed at times over the past decade that the liberal media has relied on these fairly facile gestures to preserve its progressive credentials, while crucially failing to address the mounting class struggle that has been taking place all around it; often amplifying the voices of influencers championing single-issue identity causes, while neglecting to document the anger of working-class people of all races, genders and sexual persuasions up and down the country, and neglecting to acknowledge its own part in a deeply classist society.

As the media pulls further and further away from the lived experience of working people, and class becomes increasingly denied, its rules of taste also start to appear more vividly as a means of control. This is my main reason for challenging the increasingly tepid and predictable output of our cultural institutions, and for sometimes championing work that offends the sensibilities of its middle-class gatekeepers — not because I necessarily have a vested interest in the work itself, but because any challenge to an all-pervasive and seemingly inescapable neoliberal system depends on the right for challengers to exist. What Nagle has characterised as "transgressive" art and culture in *Kill All Normies* — thereby implying that it is also gratuitous — actually serves an invaluable role in creating a more critical and responsive society. That's because mainstream cultural output that shocks, scares, challenges and surprises us also forces us to participate, and forces us to look inward and reflect on the emotional responses it creates. It works in the opposite way of the very easily digestible culture promulgated by today's gatekeepers, and creates a climate in which we all become more alert and critical in our political judgements. I could read as much theory and commentary on race relations in Western culture as I wanted and still not experience the palpable embarrassment I did from watching five minutes of *Get Out*. Such work is necessary for making all of us more cognisant to any strain of cultural bigotry and oppression, but it is particularly important for remaining aware of the many quiet and subtle ways in which neoliberal politics shapes our daily lives and perpetuates a polite oppression. In this sense, we need horror and transgression not only to allow for the expression of rage and anger that many of us rightly feel, and not just to allow for satirical output capable of skewering the incumbent elite, but to keep all of us more alert to the hypocrisy of respectable politics and culture, whose mild-mannered delivery has for too long sought to distract us from the violence of structural inequality that is contains and conceals.

Tastefulness is also highly rigged and hypocritical. After all, an aristocrat's son wearing a tracksuit remains an aristocrat's son, while a wealthy footballer driving a Lamborghini that he has chosen to paint in camo will forever be excluded and derided by the establishment. In this unilateral arrangement, the middle and upper classes are free to mine working-class culture for whatever purposes they like — freely switching between the signifiers of their class to whatever sportswear is approved by *Hypebeast* — while their working-class peers are ordered to conform to a narrow set of good taste principles defined by the establishment in order to be accepted and approved. This is something like an inversion of the "code-switching" phenomenon referred to by US congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in an April 2019 Twitter thread, following a claim made by President Trump that her ability to switch vernacular depending on audience group constituted a lack of political integrity and authenticity. Ocasio-Cortez hit back, arguing that the necessity for ethnic minority and working-class people to develop secondary speech patterns in order to succeed at work amounted to one of the most pervasive and unchallenged forms of xenophobia and class bias in America. It also lent a poignancy to her previous endorsement of US rapper Cardi B, famous among other things for the unapologetic use of her Trinidadian/Dominican-by-way-of-the-Bronx accent, and whose meteoric rise to fame constitutes one of the most vivid and hopeful symbols of working-class participation in mainstream culture of recent years. When used in reverse — that is, when the rich cosplay as the working class — it functions in much the same way as the "cool-hunting" phenomenon outlined previously, erasing and thereby negating the working-class experience.

Think of its core tenets too, and it becomes obvious how far tastefulness is used as a way of modulating and silencing cultures that diverge from the status quo. Good taste is often defined as being understated, inoffensive, muted and calm. On the flip side of this, young inheritors of the white middle class seeking to lay claim to something cool and edgy are increasingly drawn to aspects of working-class culture that they judge to be gauche, exciting and strange. This takes us back to the resurgence in terrace culture mentioned previously and its concentration in recent years among affluent, privately-educated people, particularly those working in fashion, who show little regard for how this fetishisation only makes class divisions more entrenched, by further pushing the working-class experience into the realm of morbid spectacle.

Similarly, we see on the pages of magazines aspects of the working-class experience used to sell fashion — Balenciaga jackets shot against council-estate backdrops in an assertion by its mostly white, mostly middle-class authors, including photographers, stylists and editorial staff, of the inferiority of this social milieu; an ironic juxtaposition that could not exist were all those involved not signatories to the belief that the cultural background against which it is set constitutes something disgusting.

I first encountered this flagrant and semi-ironic use of class interplay when, in an effort to vindicate my working-class parents who'd been denied the opportunity for further education themselves, and in the somewhat vain hope of improving conditions for all of us, I found myself in the halls of Oxford as an eighteen-year-old student. With the exception of a few good friends, most of whom came from working-class state-school backgrounds and found themselves feeling equally isolated and confused, the experience was unsettling and fairly disruptive to my overall wellbeing. In addition to there being widespread and unchecked misogyny, classism and bigotry of almost every possible variety, Oxford was also one the most culturally barren places I have ever encountered. For the privately educated, university seemed less an exercise in wanting to genuinely understand the world around them and more an endless game of debate and one-upmanship, where the final goal wasn't to establish truths or to find solutions to any given problem, but to simply win. In this game, reading materials were no longer entry points or ways of thinking about a given subject, but provided a stock of quotations used as collateral in arguments whose basis never extended beyond the person's own biases and judgments. Rewards were given to those who spoke most persuasively, who had the greatest command and confidence in their delivery, and who, I quickly realised, were able to most successfully mimic the styles that were peddled in the House of Commons and, increasingly, the mainstream media.

In many ways, what I encountered at Oxford seemed to flout every convention of the academic or scientific approach as I had understood it. What I witnessed instead were young people learning ways to justify their biases and confound anyone who challenged them through equivocation and an arsenal of quotations. This created the grounds on which most privately-educated people who I met there seemed to believe that the purpose of university was simply to hone and refine their all-powerful minds, rather than putting those minds to work in the service of some greater cause or purpose. It was a place, much like the ones I detail in the following chapter, where everything had been stripped of greater meaning, beyond serving as collateral in the arguments that were being formulated by these precocious young graduates of abject privilege. If culture is the expression of a collective identity and of a shared sense of belonging, then it was little surprise that, in this hub of individualism, where the power of ego reigned supreme, culture was almost nowhere to be found.

Alex James's cheese festival might serve as an extreme example of the twee approximation of what most middle-class people in Britain now understand to mean culture, but aren't most festivals really just a variation on Alex James's cheese festival, insofar as they are largely the preserve of a white establishment so devoid of any essential connection to a wider community or collective identity, that the only means it seems to have found for self-expression is dowsing its face in glitter? This, I might add, was the preferred pastime of most people I encountered during my three, fairly difficult years at Oxford. And yet, those accusing the over-tanned, Aaliya-impersonating or bindi-toting Home Counties transplants to Glastonbury or Notting Hill Carnival every year of using their culture as a costume, might be good enough to remember that these are the hapless orphans of a culture that has long since departed — smiling polaroid avatars, swirling forever on a sea of pastiche.

The Problem with Inclusion*

Under capitalist realism, quality is conflated with whatever succeeds in the market economy. When this is translated to the battleground of personality politics, we find ourselves rewarding those who display as little divergence from the status quo as possible, given our (market) fear that anyone else is incapable of achieving mass appeal. To appreciate how far this thinking is able to supplant the rational faculties needed in order for a democratic society to properly function, consider the following two cases of collective amnesia.

The first comes from the centrist and liberal contingent in the UK, who, feeling they had no clear representation in party politics since the departure of Tony Blair, made repeat calls for a centrist leadership candidate in the shape of a David Miliband, or even a British equivalent to Emmanuel Macron or Justin Trudeau. Tune into LBC or the Radio 4 *Today* programme and you'll hear people describing any one of these (relatively) young, white, able-bodied men as "looking the part" or having the appeal of a "true leader". The structural racism, sexism, ageism *and classism* at play in this assessment is almost too obvious to dwell on, but its motivations can never be divorced from the realities imposed by capitalist thinking. This assessment is all the more absurd for the fact that the only examples of such leadership figures in recent memory also account for two of modern politics' most dire and embarrassing legacies. The first is of course Tony Blair, whose tenure was exposed fairly unequivocally as being little more than an elaborate PR-sham dreamed up by Alastair Campbell and Peter

Mandelson, and which led to one of the gravest political mistakes made in recent memory. The other was David Cameron, once the first prime minister reputed to have copulated with a dead animal, now responsible for causing — and subsequently abandoning — the biggest constitutional crisis in modern British history.

I don't want it to seem as though I *misunderstand the underlying principle of democracy* here, but instead seek to highlight that the concurrent evolution of democratic societies alongside capitalism has delivered us to a point where suitability has been transposed by a maddening fixation on the external and superficial indicators of market attractiveness. On the one hand, and in its more extreme guise, this equates to a perpetuation of the white, male power stereotype. But its mechanisms have also become more agile in an era of heightened activity in identity politics, broadening its scope to include a slightly wider set of demographics — judged purely along lines of age, gender and race — but nevertheless remaining just as prohibiting in terms of values, style, delivery and taste.

This amounts to something similar to the false advertising techniques employed by Blair during the 1990s, and allows the perpetuation of the status quo to continue under the guise of a more progressive and inclusive politics. This is an accusation that's been levelled at the Democratic Party in America, particularly since the election of Barack Obama as the President of the United States of America, and secondly of Hillary Clinton as the Democratic candidate for the 2016 presidential election. Both were celebrated widely by the liberal media as wins for both the black community and women respectively, but often without acknowledging the real-term harm being caused to both demographics as a result of increased levels of poverty, homelessness and incarceration by the neoliberal politics that these two figures represented and preserved, as well as the agenda of hegemonic control that subjugates countries in the global south and promotes war. This is why congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez represents something exciting and unprecedented, for while her status as a second-generation Puerto Rican immigrant woman has undoubtedly shaped the course of her career and politics, neither factor of her identity overshadows the anti-capitalist policy platform on which she stands, and which she is seemingly irrepressible in bringing to the establishment.

This lends AOC an authenticity and rigour that holds up even under the heightened levels of scrutiny imposed by the internet, and which has been lacking in contemporary politics. It was just this lack of authenticity that gave Hillary Clinton's attempts to ingratiate herself on a young, "woke" audience during the 2016 presidential campaigns such an air of discomfort. The tendency to solely attribute her defeat to a global conspiracy shows a total aversion on the part of the legacy media to admit its own blind spots, and to interrogate its own woeful ineptitude in challenging the sham PR tactics of the neoliberal political project, which, to an audience of digital natives who exist in a continual stream of discourse and analysis, are always patently obvious. It is easy to forget, given the Democratic candidate's ultimate defeat, that Clinton was nevertheless the *grande dame* of the liberal establishment during the campaign, with few others even reckoning in the media consciousness as a viable contender. In the two-party system, criticism of Clinton became almost taboo as the broad church represented by the Democratic Party focussed its energies on creating a barrier to the much larger threat of Trump. While its motivations were understandable, this led to resentment among a younger, left-leaning set of voters — but not exclusively — who held no loyalty, or in many cases even *memory*, of the Clinton brand. Once again, this generation was correct in feeling that an older generation, a generation that was responsible for, and in many ways still preventing them from recovering from, the economic crash of 2008, was now also censoring their means to political expression.

Not to mention the active contempt many held for Clinton on account of her loyalty to Bill.

There were even some who were celebrating her candidateship as a win for feminism, a view that showed a flagrant disregard for the young women who accused Bill Clinton of sexual misconduct and who were treated largely as collateral damage in the desperate scramble to save his presidency and reputation. Perhaps it was not until Donald Trump's inauguration, and in comparison with the nauseating, convivial displays put on between the Obamas and Bushes, that the full depravity of Clinton's career sunk in — the depression wrought in the sharp lines that accompanied his vacant stare.

Hillary Clinton, like Blair, had tried to align herself with progressive causes and celebrities for the sake of attracting a younger electorate, courting the likes of Katy Perry, LeBron James, Morgan Freeman, Lady Gaga, Lena Dunham, Beyoncé and Jay-Z. To everyone besides the liberal media, it was obvious why this tactic no longer worked: the internet had brought us far closer to both celebrities and politicians than in the years when this kind of PR campaign was first employed, eroding the fourth wall to the extent that any edifice was now abundantly apparent. Politicians would no longer be able to engineer the appearance of wider cultural movements, as they were in the 1990s, and Hillary's attempts thus fell short of securing her a victory. A clear message had been sent out: electioneering in the old sense — using PR spin and celebrity endorsements — would no longer work on younger voters. The emphasis had shifted and political beliefs of all persuasions were being shaped by online communities. History is always dictated by success stories, and on account of Trump's win, the narrative of the online culture wars is now being told in almost exclusively damning terms, as if the medium itself were to blame for the messages that were shared by the alt-right during the campaign. In fact, the internet had hastened and exaggerated political critique across the board, leaving politicians from both persuasions more exposed, and more likely to be identified for their cynical election ploys, than ever before.

The verdict from this young voter base of digital natives was that, without a strong, anti-establishment policy platform, inclusion — even at the highest level of government — won't automatically equate to an improvement of conditions for marginalised and underserved communities. In fact, there is a tendency, similar to that which we saw under Blair, of these underserved communities being used and exploited by such election campaigns, where, in a bid to boost the progressive credentials of their candidates, they are sold out for photo opportunities and magazine feature fodder.

Though Trump's policies and general presence amount to something far more corrosive for ethnic minorities and working-class people than a Hillary Clinton presidency would ever have been capable of, this shouldn't stop us from reflecting on the fundamental issues latent within the neoliberal project. Trump, arguably on account of the fact that his explicitly racist and xenophobic platform simply couldn't elicit much by way of cool celebrity endorsements, seemed to fortuitously escape the same trap of so many awkward PR moments and celebrity selfies (though his opportunistic engagements with Kanye West and Kim Kardashian in the years since certainly suggests some appetite). Again, we come to the uncomfortable conclusion that Trump's success might be partially explained by a series of unfortunate mistakes made possible by the ideological vacuum created by neoliberal politics, as much as any real agency on the part of him or his team.

Inclusion within a system that by its very nature holds in contempt the communities from which minority and working-class candidates hail, will often also reduce both to spectacle and abuse, particularly in cases where the person in question resists, or else fails, to align themselves with the styles of delivery peddled by those in power. We've seen this played out vividly in the case of British MP Diane Abbott, the first black woman elected to British parliament with one of the strongest and most consistent support-bases of any MP in her constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington. As a black woman in the Houses of Parliament, however — and crucially a black woman whose politics and delivery differs from the majority white, privately educated political class on account of having never tried to replicate its style of managerialism, whose origins can be traced back to the earliest days of imperialism — she has also been on the receiving end of a core strain of explicit racism and bigotry. A liberal media that feels sufficiently entitled to castigate her for incompetence on the grounds of this divergence has legitimised this — its unchallenged value judgements on tastefulness, competence and appropriateness once again wielded as definitive proof.

It is here, too, that we begin to see most vividly how tastefulness and respectability are used as tools to promote assimilation, and assist oppression. In the UK, when Nigerian-British MP Kate Osamor recently faced dismissal from Parliament owing to her son’s involvement in drug-related crime in 2016, we saw the British establishment’s respectability alarm ringing at full volume. After his conviction was disclosed, Osamor was referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards by Conservative MP Anne-Marie Trevelyan, herself a graduate of the £8,920-a-term St. Paul’s Girls School. Osamor’s response in lashing out at a *Times* journalist after doorstepping her two months later was illegal, though perhaps worthy of some empathy given the vast structural violence that had led to her entire career being undermined by the selective justice of parliamentary procedure — and indeed the police. In what now appears like a perfect example of the cruelty that is often latent in the notion of respectability, several members of the liberal media responded with outrage to the former, while failing to speak out half as vehemently against the racism that had contributed to Osamor’s anger. Structural violence and racism that prevents millions from prospering would be permitted, but a momentary loss of control would not. And all this is without even mentioning the vast amounts of cocaine swishing around the British establishment that several of these appalled journalists are no doubt aware of.

The hypocrisy of demanding “respectable” behaviour from minority groups within a system that belies vast, structural violence and inequality is of course not just limited to parliamentary politics, either. Take for example the horrendous treatment by the British press of footballer Raheem Sterling. Since his first appearances for Liverpool in 2012, but more acutely in the years since joining Manchester City in 2015, Sterling has faced a sustained and vicious attack from the British media, suffering vile chants from football supporters vindicated by a racist tabloid culture determined to humiliate and deride his every lifestyle choice. Unsurprisingly, the *Sun* and the *Daily Mail* are among the worst culprits, oscillating in their “reports” between headlines shouting about Sterling’s “outrageously decorated”[46], “blinging house”[47], or his shopping trips to Primark. What unites these seemingly schizophrenic headlines, which castigate Sterling one minute for spending too much money and spending too little the next, is a grotesque conflation of racism and class discrimination. Sterling presents an affront to the British establishment both in his blackness *and* his unwillingness to abide by its tyrannical rules of taste. Sterling is proud, confident and expressive — three qualities that are celebrated when they are embodied by the white inheritors of the British establishment — but viewed as an audacious overstepping of one’s territory when they are embodied by a man, who against the odds of a society and economy that is aggressively skewed against black people, nevertheless succeeded. Marginalised candidates will be accepted by the establishment providing they play by its rules, and are sculpted and packaged to fit within its highly autocratic middle-class rules of taste. In other words, providing they are never able to make any direct or implied challenge to the establishment nor its attendant power structures.

Irrespective of the fact that Sterling has been permitted access to the highest echelons of celebrity and fame, an expressive and self-confident black man from a working-class background — one who builds the house he wants to live in according to aesthetic preferences that have evolved *outside* of what's been ordained by *Grand Designs* presenter Kevin McCloud — is a level of self-determination that the media is evidently unwilling to accept. The aggression towards Sterling, and other members of the newly rich whom the media either explicitly or implicitly castigates as tasteless, is driven by a growing insecurity, owing to the fact that its existence relies on an ever more precarious set of value judgements that are being undermined and derided from every angle on account of the internet. The British establishment has always tried to counter its own insecurities by igniting hate and bigotry, and yet Sterling, for all the abuse he's sustained, has nevertheless emerged resplendent — a hero to millions and a brilliant counterpoint to the British media's entrenched prejudice.

What's more, owing to their authority on the subject of good taste, the middle-class gatekeepers of our collective culture have also been able to effectively disguise their own bigotry. Racism is frequently painted as a problem contained within the "white working class" — a label that is useful for some purposes, but which also negates the fact that a large portion of the working class comes from minority ethnic populations, while emphasising the plight of white communities above black and Asian communities, and dividing the working class along lines of race to thereby minimise the possibility for solidarity.[48] While the likes of Tommy Robinson continue to inflate their own sense of importance by declaring themselves representatives of the working class in Britain, the media has arguably failed to sufficiently challenge this idea, and also on occasion, unfairly tended to reduce the working class to this stereotype. The effect of which is to censor and negate the working-class experience, whilst simultaneously distracting from, and downplaying, the very prevalent forces of racism that run through the heart of the middle-class establishment, leaving their “respectable” rages unnoticed.

Good Morning Britain host Piers Morgan is one such example of how the smirking bigotry of the middle classes continues to get a free pass. While there’s no denying that Tommy Robinson is a gangrenous ulcer on the leg of modern Britain, his reach extends nowhere near that of today’s coiffed and fake-tanned TV and radio show hosts peddling a far less explicit but no less harmful message of supremacy. In June 2018, and with fear of this book becoming a thesis on TV show *The Apprentice,* its host Alan Sugar — entrepreneur and self-styled representative of the upwardly-mobile — tweeted a picture of the Senegal football team at the 2018 World Cup with the following caption: “I recognise some of these guys from the beach in Marbella. Multi tasking resourceful chaps”.[49] The statement worked on several levels to expose Sugar’s racism, demonstrating abject colourism in the assertion that all Senegalese people look the same, while openly mocking the structural factors extending from colonialism that keep people from the global south constrained by a capitalist system designed to work against them. So fundamental is this way of thinking to the false illusion of white supremacy that still underscores great swathes of the white Western identity, that this kind of joke went largely unchecked until the arrival of the internet and the ability of incisive, passionate people to finally hold the likes of Sugar to account. To the extent that this happened in Sugar’s case, however, the mainstream media still nevertheless continued to platform him. Sugar’s contract with the BBC remains intact, giving implicit approval to this kind of commentary, which, however casually they might want to portray it, originates in the cruelty and violence of colonialism and systemic racism.

Meanwhile, of course, Boris Johnson continues to use the slang of early-twentieth-century colonisers with what, by his estimation at least, equates to a mischievous irreverence for today’s “political correctness”. His style is arguably less conspicuous in its racism than that of Geert Wilders in the Netherlands or even Donald Trump, but that hardly diminishes its corrosive effect. In recent years, Johnson has written a limerick claiming the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has sex with goats, dubbed Barack Obama “part-Kenyan” with an “ancestral dislike” of Britain, referred to black people from the Commonwealth and the Congo variously as “piccaninnies” and having “watermelon smiles”, and said that women who wear Burkas look like “bank robbers” and “letter boxes”. These comments allow Johnson to embody the true character of nationalism and white supremacy in modern Britain, where most racists don’t consciously acknowledge their own bigotry but, like Johnson, occupy management roles and live in respectable townhouses, while only entertaining these naughty views in the quiet company of their friends and family, usually after a few drinks. In this sense, Johsnon gives voice to, and legitimizes, a tendency that is rampant up and down the country.

Much has been written about his bewildering rise to power, and how his brand of schoolboy humour and suppressed laughter absolves him, and a large demographic like him, of the racism they’ve been accused of for decades, presenting their harmful and discriminatory views as little more than casual jokes. This tactic allows Johnson to emerge as the poster-boy for a certain strain of “common sense” that presupposes the superiority of white people and protects their freedom to observe, and make jokes about, the divergent tendencies of a “colonial underclass”. To his supporters, including those who quietly laugh into their glasses of Côtes du Rhône with each new slur that he delivers, Johnson represents a nostalgic dream of unabated bigotry, a time when people didn’t have to live under the tyrannical constraints of a basic humanity. Johnson, in spite of defending one of the most longstanding and entrenched beliefs of the British Empire, is therefore able to present himself as some kind of agitating outlier, happy to take the flak from a young cohort of moralisers and do-gooders who for too long have been able to repress the tendencies of their elders.

He is able to do this because the press, rather than calling him out, insists on perpetuating an image of Johnson as the bumbling idiot. Time and again we hear about Johnson's various "gaffes", with the media presenting racist slurs as an ongoing series of mistakes made by a foolhardy and reckless politician. "Cringe worthy!" cries the *Mirror.* "Calamitous!" says the *Independent*. *Politico* even invited readers to consider some of Johnson's "best (and worst!) gaffes".[50] Even the arguably more damning takes fail to name what is really happening, with the BBC referring to his slew of racist comments as "controversial foreign insults".[51]

Johnson serves as an exaggerated example through which to explain a phenomenon that is happening in far quieter ways all around us. His popularity proves that racist and elitist mentalities run deep in British society, and our failure to successfully hold him to account signals a far greater failing in identifying and eradicating the quieter forms of exclusion and bigotry that shape and inform our institutions and mainstream culture.

Part of the problem in being able to challenge this view is that so few people with the effective means of doing so are granted permission to the platforms governing our media, and those that are, find themselves constrained by its increasingly restrictive rules of taste and propriety.

In the print media, what few direct and explicit attacks are made on Johnson and those like him are largely confined to within the comment section of newspapers. Championing the profile of their writers, and presenting the views expressed therein as hypothetical positions within a wider debate, this subsection absolves newspapers of the responsibility of having to take a firm editorial line, presenting a degree of distance between the views expressed on the page and the publication that commissioned them. It is of course better than not that these views are aired, but the comment section in and of itself is a far from perfect answer to a growing number of social problems that require direct and outspoken objection, including racism, poverty, inequality, homelessness and austerity. What's more, the spokespeople authoring these comment pieces are usually also subject to a degree of stereotyping and profiling. With nearly all of them being freelance, they are rarely remunerated or provided the job security of the majority white, middle-class editorial staff on permanent contracts.

This might seem to contradict my earlier point: that often white, middle-class people speak on behalf of, and at the expense of, working-class and minority people. But the containment of the latter to within the secondary space of the comment section, rather than occupying senior editorial positions, is an act of marginalisation in itself. So long as working-class and minority writers are disproportionately tasked with producing "personal essays", rather than holding the editorial reins of these establishment outlets and having the opportunity to shape them in their image, the use of the comment section as a means of achieving greater diversity and inclusion remains pitifully superficial, and no better than the tokenistic efforts of the New Labour leadership outlined earlier in this book.

Stuart Hall claimed that the notion of "diversity" popularised in the late Nineties was little more than a euphemism for "difference".[52] By the same logic, it is this same "difference" that underscores so many "outreach" programmes, or similar, which uphold the *de facto* occupancy of the highest positions of power and influence by the white middle-class establishment, but provide easier participation in its output to a wider group of divergent peoples. Whether it's inviting more children from underprivileged backgrounds to see a Phyllida Barlow show at the Royal Academy, or a Polly Stenham play at the National Theatre, the dynamic remains the same: rich, privileged, white people retain the prestigious role of creator, while the organisations responsible for ordaining their work allow a greater number of outsiders to share in the glory of its matchless quality. It also makes several quiet assumptions about taste.

The assertion is always that low-income equates to lower culture, and that only by granting access to the kinds of high art produced by the upper-classes can we hope to educate and improve the lives of working-class subjects. This works on the assumption that working-class culture is inherently bad, rather than accepting the far more accurate explanation that by maligning working-class culture for such a long time, it now appears vulgar, distasteful and wanton when compared with the more pervasive modes of expression propagated by the middle-class establishment. I have highlighted already the discursive nature of these rules of taste and their ability to cement elitist judgements, but I have also shown, through the example of Johnson, his TV show acolytes and a media that fails to hold them to account, how rules of taste specifically governing British culture in the present moment actively seek to undermine working-class and minority communities. This is not a hypothetical observation about the shortcomings of a media *in the abstract*, but a blow-by-blow account of how our current cultural gatekeepers continue to fail the majority of working-class and low-to-middle-income people up and down the country.

Simply creating more space for working-class and minority voices to participate in a culture that, by its very nature, subjugates and erases people in these communities is inherently disingenuous. What’s more, the mechanisms by which outreach, diversity, representation and inclusivity function are themselves an extension of capitalist thinking, with underlying value judgements ascribed to certain superficial indicators of wealth and status at the level of both the recipient and the purveyor. The target of such schemes are those conspicuous outliers of the status quo — people living in inner-city council housing, for example — and not just assessed along lines of financial necessity, which manifests in several other ways too. Rarely do you find outreach programmes seeking to target, for example, the culturally-barren landscape of most commuter-belt Persimmon housing estates, despite these often also containing some portion of social housing, since these places fit squarely within the middle-class dogmatic standards of respectability. Fewer still are targeted at the sterile environs of north and west London's gated communities, which while affluent, are equally bereft of any authentic "culture". It is this hypocrisy that makes such attempts appear so much like civilising missions — less an authentic attempt to educate, and more a bid to indoctrinate low-income and minority communities to promote assimilation.

What's more, any challenge to this way of thinking immediately undermines the false assumptions of meritocracy on which the gatekeepers of this industry function, and by which they are assumed to hold any authority. In spite of their specialist degrees and years of work experience — in fact, because of such factors — the vast majority of people working in the arts also advance several harmful assumptions about human capital. In what will no doubt offend many people I know, it requires us to interrogate the flawed mechanisms by which art, and the people tasked with ordaining it, are selected.

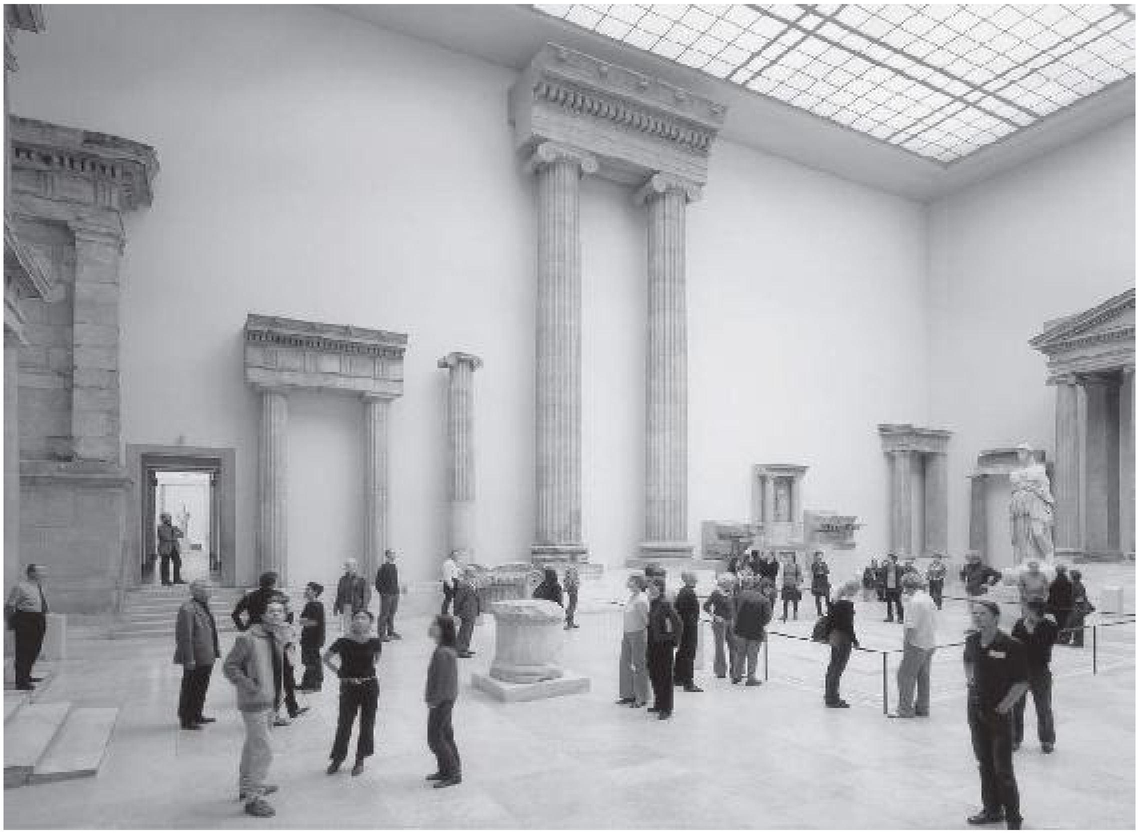
In *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher urges us to see that the marketplace necessarily dictates a dissociation of objects from the more intimate and metaphysical meanings ascribed to them by the communities to which they belong. This is because, in a capitalist society, everything is reduced to a system of equivalence, becoming the metric of an external — and therefore implicitly, *objective* — system of economic value. This leads to a scenario by which we casually accept the fairly absurd premise of the museum, whereby disparate and unconnected objects are presented collectively due to the importance retroactively attributed to them under the economic imperatives of rarity and fame, but also country of origin, culture of origin, and proximity to the approved histories of Western civilisation. It is why we also accept the fairly absurd premise of most commercial galleries —

enclaves of dubiously-acquired wealth frequented by the super wealthy, but nevertheless peddling a line of artistic integrity. To illustrate his point, Fisher uses the example of the British Museum, a place "where you see objects torn from their lifeworlds and assembled as if on the deck of some Predator spacecraft." He further explains: "In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, [and] transformed into artefacts." In this sense, he argues, "Capitalist realism is therefore not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism in itself."[53] Realism is the appropriation of objects, or replication of events and experiences in as life-like terms as possible, so as to eliminate the need for active participation, and promote consumerism or its cultural equivalent: tourism. It is the reduction of life to sterile commodity.

Some of the most powerful documents of this phenomenon include Thomas Struth's *Museum Photographs* — a series of images capturing tourists in some of the world's most prestigious museums and galleries. Without any of the explicit irony seen in the likes of Martin Parr's work, Struth captures the quiet surrealism of viewing objects dislocated from their lifeworlds and reimagined purely as spectacle against the sterile background of the gallery wall. In *Pergamon Museum III*, (Berlin, 2001) for example, visitors saunter between Doric and Ionic pillars lining the walls, though crucially never entering *through* them as originally intended. This creates a disquieting spectacle, of two disparate images — the pillars and the people — transposed on top of one another in some kind of collage, never interacting or touching and forever existing on two separate and distinct planes of reality. In another, *Louvre 4* (Paris, 1989), onlookers admire *The Raft of the Medusa*, their smartly-dressed attire and relaxed poses contrasting starkly with the flesh-spectacle and suffering in front of them.

These images distil a phenomenon by which we voyeuristically dip into any number of issues, causes or cultures with a clinical and safe distance.

We are tourists of culture rather than participants, having only to attend a museum or, increasingly, capture it on our phones. It's an individualistic pursuit whose mechanisms also come to reflect the tendencies of commerce. Stand for a few minutes in the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam or the Louvre in Paris as the crowds elbow each other to catch a glimpse of the *Sunflowers* or the *Mona Lisa*, and you see how far the marketing of these objects has played a part in their cultural cachet. Most of us couldn't explain the merits of either painting compared with the other items in the gallery without resorting to the received wisdom of our school textbooks or Wikipedia, so it's fair to assume that the slack mouths they elicit aren't in every case a response to the superlative brushstrokes. No different to celebrity, fanaticism for the objects contained within the holy walls of the gallery is a direct response to the institution's ability to successfully posit itself, and everything it contains, into an economic construct of superlative value. And these institutions are built on the false notion of white supremacy, on centuries of peddling a Eurocentric, almost exclusively white art history whose driving force — from the patrons of Renaissance Florence to the gallerists of the Upper East Side — has always been capitalism.



Pergamon Museum 3, Berlin 2001 © Thomas Struth

Louvre 4, Paris 1989 © Thomas Struth

I say all of this only in the hope of reminding us of the mechanisms by which the gallery or museum function, rather than seeking to boycott an industry that I have, and will probably at times continue to participate in. But it is here that we begin to develop an understanding of how, and even in spite of economic factors that undoubtedly exacerbate inequality, the institutions governing our so-called collective culture cannot help but perpetuate a culture of elitism and exclusion. That’s because the role of the curator in the above example — and by extension, the editor, publisher, theatre director and record label boss — is itself no more than a modulator of an economic value system steeped in hierarchy and elitist thinking. Insofar as they are tasked with acting in the institution’s economic interests and perpetuating the rigged notion of high culture, the curator in an establishment institution such as the British Museum functions no differently to a trader or investment fund manager, responding to market trends rather than seeking to establish anything like a conscientious or radical agenda. In order to perpetuate the myth of their inherent value and secure their future existence, these roles *by their very nature* have to be filled by candidates whose cultural signifiers — from posture and manner of speech, to the fairly imperfect measure of intelligence and aptitude that is school and university grades — suggest their proximity to these structures of power.

Over time and through diversity programmes, these signifiers might adjust slightly to include a broader "scope" of people. But that breadth will again be drawn along superficial lines that reduce candidates to little more than the indicators of their social and cultural capital. Concessions might be made to include more black people, more disabled and more northern people, for example, who the market has historically undervalued, but they will still nevertheless be required to function in much the same way as their predecessors, to uphold the values and judgements of an institution that has always historically erased these demographics in real terms.

In outreach, diversity and inclusion programmes, we see not so much the effort to include a wider scope of experience within mainstream culture, then, but the effort to indoctrinate more people into the pervasive modes of taste ordained by the establishment. Post-Blair, we are able to see more clearly how efforts to bring working-class and minority people into the fold of mainstream culture, without forfeiting existing power structures, serves only in the interests of those incumbent gatekeepers, and how, through the altruistic framing of these narratives, we can be distracted from the efforts to create a cultural hegemony.

In order for democracies to function effectively, it is essential for there to be not only adequate representation in the scope of political candidates and parties, but a representative mainstream media and avenues of culture which serve as a proxy for political beliefs and a window into the wider world. This is crucial to the functioning of opinion, but also self-belief and identity, with the media and cultural institutions serving as a mirror to individual experiences and communities, reflecting their history, belief systems and origins. For a democracy to function, all members of a society are required to achieve a degree of self-actualisation to the extent that they can believe their vote counts, and that their actions will be capable of shaping outcomes beyond their immediate experience. This factor won't even be intuited by those whose cultural cachet has always been assured by the markers of a university education, a level of earning that grants them access to the kinds of consumer lifestyles seen in advertising campaigns, and a family legacy of being invited to important social occasions. But for the vast majority of people, focussed solely on being able to pay their bills and feed their families from month to month, the belief that they have any kind of agency to affect these processes can never be assumed.

Popular culture is one of the few ways that we can assure more people of their relevance to society. Year on year we see campaigns to increase voter participation, the crux of the message being: if we all opted out, nothing would improve. But the engineers of these campaigns would be wise to realise that voter turnout is intimately connected to a person's conception of how far they matter, which can either be confirmed or denied by the mainstream culture that is propagated by our TV screens, book pages, galleries, music streaming services and column inches. And the role of art and literature in democracy doesn't stop there — as our societal values continue to evolve and are constantly being renegotiated, so it's required to be just as agile, giving us a means by which to evaluate our own viewpoints and invite serious introspection towards our own complicit role in a range of issues.

All of which has been undermined not only by an explosion of art and culture set squarely within the middle-class experience, but by the fact that what working-class exposure does still exist is presented increasingly through the sardonic and disapproving lens of its broadly upper-middle-class producers. Over the past few decades we've seen a huge rise in the number of reality TV and documentary formats that essentially pit their producers, directors and presenters against a range of minority and disadvantaged communities. The most famous and openly derided examples being shows such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, *Benefits Street, My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* and *Educating Yorkshire*, as well as a host of spin-off shows including *Educating Essex* and the snappily-titled *Educating Greater Manchester*. To a lesser extent, even shows with no ostensible class bias, such as Louis Theroux's documentaries, are guilty at times of employing the slightly removed and sardonic gaze that subtly implies judgement and mockery. The inevitable line of defence for these shows is that they take aim at both the rich *and* the working classes depending on subject matter, the implication being that they either don't see class or don't consider it to be a factor in whatever issues they happen to be reporting. Yet while the one constitutes "punching up" — that is, speaking truth to power and challenging privilege — the other serves little purpose beyond perpetuating negative stereotypes of an already heavily derided set of people.

The same goes for reality gameshow formats that hire from a pool of almost exclusively working- and lower-middle-class applicants. This is justified on the grounds that these people have volunteered themselves — a line of reasoning that accepts no responsibility for exploiting the financial imperatives that might have led them to do so. In 2019, it was reported that former *Love Island* contestant Mike Thalassitis had committed suicide owing to financial struggles and mental health issues. The show's producers vowed to offer greater psychological support to contestants, without addressing the fact that the format itself was arguably responsible for setting unrealistic expectations for its participants. The reality TV show format has always been predicated on the derision and mockery of working-class people — even if that sometimes means extending its reach into what is largely judged to be the “thick” and “gauche” nouveau riche — the entertainment value always hinging on the spectacle of its “naive” participants.

I hope that we will soon start to reflect on TV shows such as *X Factor* and *Britain’s Got Talent* with a more critical analysis of the way they exploit their contestants: directors goading mainly young, eager-eyed people from mainly working-class backgrounds, who don’t yet realise how slim their chances of success are, to pour out their most personal and heartfelt stories of financial strain and family struggle. I hope we will wince at the way that they were mined for all their sob-story value before being discarded, or how less fortunate applicants were also ridiculed for their lack of ability. I hope that we will start to see how TV and other avenues of popular entertainment increasingly commoditized human beings — reducing them to little more than a backstory, suitable for a Coldplay overture if little else. And while I’m not the first and won’t be the last to highlight the questionable morality of these shows, I might just be the first to try and equate them with a liberal, broadsheet culture that is arguably guilty of committing many of the same crimes.

In recent years we’ve seen countless aspiring young, freelance writers be persuaded by senior editors to write first-person pieces detailing some of their most personal and compromising information, all in exchange for a small fee and often with psychological repercussions that the publication and its editors had no intention of providing for. The liberal media is among the worst culprits of this, boosting its own traffic by trading on its prestige and the difficulty of breaking into paid journalism, with the writer in question often realising that what was once framed by hungry editors as their matchless writing abilities, was really just a ruse for persuading them to do that which the permanent members of staff were unwilling to do themselves. I have also watched as many young writers from low-income backgrounds, who were mined for their novel takes in the first-instance, were later discarded for having refused, or in many cases, failed to understand the legacy's media's rules of taste.

This is where most media outlets currently stand, appearing to have made no real effort to redress their highly elitist hiring policies, and making only small concessions to a younger, poorer workforce with minimal capacity to actually shape or advance things for the better. But I hope to have shown that inclusion, without any degree of agency or control of the editorial agenda, in this sense, amounts to more harm than good.

The Problem with Impostor Syndrome*

One of the great wins for identity politics has been a broadening of the conversation around mental health, and to the extent that this has also coincided with a swell in the number of white-collar workers, it has also tended to focus on the many ways in which the office impacts our wellbeing. Scroll through the pages of most magazines in 2019 and you'll find stories shedding light on various mental health conditions and treatments. This is the kind of admission that even a decade ago could have been tantamount to social and professional ostracism. But it has been so far normalised that we now broadly accept that at one time or another most of us will suffer from conditions such as anxiety and depression, and as a society we are better poised than ever before to both identify the symptoms and find possible avenues for help.

During the Lost Decade, I and many others found solace in the writings of Mark Fisher. Among other things, Fisher helped to frame the depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions we were experiencing as the natural response to the rather unnatural forces of late capitalism, and helped me to understand that, far from being incidental to it, the mental health conditions we were being taught to cope with within the modern workplace were almost a necessity of its very existence.

In recent years, however, the advertising industry has keenly and shamelessly exploited issues of identity politics for the purposes of pushing products. Issues including gender parity and feminism are regularly quoted by banks, clothing brands, food stores and gym companies to help bolster their progressive credentials — and mental health awareness is no exception. In what seems like an almost perfect symbol of neoliberalism's ability to corrupt our most deeply held truths, companies that are guilty of some of the most brazen and unapologetic exploitation of their workers and complicit in a consumer culture that is responsible for leaving millions of people feeling inadequate, now brandish slogans telling us to open up and let the rivers of internal anguish run free. To fully comprehend the extent of this, consider the fact that on World Mental Health Day 2018, 1.8 million people following the Burger King UK Twitter account received a message telling them, "You're beautiful, you're loved, you matter…." The irony being that, with income insecurity being one of the major contributors to depression and anxiety, Burger King still pays its workers the bare minimum.[54]

But of course none of that matters when companies can function entirely at the fictional level of "brands", dreamed up for them by the copywriters and creative strategists who populate the thousands of design studios littered across London. Countless graduates of arts and humanities courses make up these teams, and are mined by the industry for their relevant takes. This, combined with the frenzied attempts by greying advertising execs to stay relevant, goes some way to explaining the #activism trend we've seen creeping into the corporate advertising space. What Wallace described as "advertising posing as art" is something close to an "advertorial", whose name, a bizarre portmanteau illustrative of advertising's new Frankenstein proportions, is now common fare in most magazine offices. So convoluted are the mechanisms of advertising today, that an "advertorial" is an article intended to be read like any other, but funded by a brand for the purposes of promoting awareness and brand loyalty. Supplanting the magazine's own editorial line, it must adhere to whatever requirements the brand stipulates, meaning the reader is duped into consuming what they think is editorial content, only to be delivered subtle messages encouraging them to buy more products.

As a young writer working in magazines, my job often involved producing these articles, and in doing so I began to build a clear picture of how advertising can extend its reach beyond traditional formats and slowly also conquer the platforms that were once reserved for challenging power. The points raised by Wallace can also be extended to advertising that masquerades as activism, whose tactics go a long way in corrupting our language and stripping our lives of a certain sensitivity; because no sooner have we found a way to articulate our feelings, than it's commandeered by an advertising industry which by default reduces it to cliché, leaving us once again unable to articulate ourselves — or as Wallace puts it, becoming emotionally "impotent". When everything is fair game to advertisers, and even our most heartfelt sentiments can be swiftly transformed into ad copy, our only other recourse is irony — that uncomfortable eye-roll as we speak the word out of the side of our mouths, scared of sounding like a Lloyds TSB ad and preferring to seem like we only half mean what we are saying. It's either that or avoiding sincerity altogether, and neither seems particularly conducive to solving the mental health crisis or the pandemic levels of loneliness we're currently suffering under.

In this brave new world, where scores of graduates are tasked with imbuing brands with a "personality" and "tone of voice", even the worst scandal will not prove fatal, as consumers become the victims of a long and drawn-out campaign to believe in falsehood. Try working at a creative agency for half a day and count how many times you hear the admission that, while something might not be true, "we can still get away with saying it". This mass-level gaslighting leaves all of us more vulnerable to manipulation, and more vulnerable to the accusation that we're responsible for a vast many more of society's ills than is actually the case.

When a tactic like this stands to encroach on issues as fundamental as our mental health, the damaging repercussions can never be underestimated. It’s a tendency that was most eloquently communicated by Fisher when he argued that much of the discussion around mental health has led to the erroneous belief that the strains felt from living in a ruthlessly capitalist society are in fact the product of some psychological shortcoming. Trite messages telling consumers to “love themselves” or “reach out” have the harmful effect of making it seem as though mental health is really no more complicated than that, placing the burden on the individual to resolve often complicated conditions, and making it seem as though they could have avoided their fate through a few subtle differences in lifestyle. Not only is this harmful because it’s incorrect and might prevent someone from seeking the professional help they need, it also places the responsibility squarely with the individual, rather than the system in which they have been forced to operate. By mapping certain pathologies popularised under capitalism to the socioeconomic factors contributing to their existence, Fisher laid bare the mechanisms by which we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, goaded into low self-esteem by a rampantly consumerist and capitalist society.

Of all these popularised pathologies, impostor syndrome — described by *Time* magazine as a feeling of fraudulence or inadequacy in the workplace[55] — has enjoyed a large portion of column inches and airtime. But while naming this tendency is said to go a long way in helping many of us to achieve more at work, when we start to interrogate its definition, we also begin to appreciate its wholly natural occurrence given the many ways in which capitalist societies and their value systems function. Much like the objects in the gallery, the modern workplace reduces human beings to a system of equivalence, and in order for participants from working-class and minority backgrounds to be valued at the same level as their white, middle-class peers, they’ll be required to temper the way they speak, dress and behave. For many, this won’t be considered a huge loss — after all, social mobility is often driven by a desire to join the ranks of the well-dressed and the cultured, but in as far as it is a *necessity* dictated by the modern workplace, it also constitutes a vast amount of unremunerated and uncredited labour.

This is the phenomenon referred to by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as "code-switching".[56] By automatically favouring the powerful, and by extension perpetuating the status quo, neoliberalism has thereby succeeded in supplanting the behaviours and values of the middle-class incumbent power-keepers onto our most deeply-held perceptions of what constitutes professionalism, quality and even sound mental health. Rather than debunking this mechanism and exposing its highly rigged and troubled origins, the media has overwhelmingly subscribed to the pathology of impostor syndrome, administering advice to working-class people on how to better conform and "iron out" any divergent aspects of their character and outer appearance in order to succeed. This represents a woeful ineptitude for critiquing the power structures that govern society, being complicit in a value judgement that ascribes deficiency and even mental derangement to anyone who now diverges from the very narrow set of middle-class signifiers approved by the modern workplace.

My advice to anyone reading this is to resist this line of reasoning. While it might go against the ideas peddled by most self-help and management books, I would suggest that rather than internalising the structural shame imposed by the corporate workplace, as well as by certain seats of learning and certain social circles, it is important for all of us to remain vigilant to the many ways in which it dehumanizes and strips us of our identity. To lose sight of this, and to attribute that feeling to some psychological shortcoming, is to internalise capitalism and to lose sight of our essential identity — and, by extension, our creativity too. Fraudulence within a system that is itself fraudulent, rigged and insincere is essentially a misnomer. Conversely, that sense of fraudulence might just be the guiding light we need to navigate neoliberalism's wild west of corrupted symbolism, meaning and truth.

For this reason we must also resist the logic that employers make their hiring decisions based on ability alone, and not how far the candidate in question complies with a set of very superficial factors, as well as their perceived willingness to forfeit their time, energies and identity for the purposes of advancing the corporation. The ego-boosting assertion that any organisation hires only the best and brightest candidates has been used for too long to persuade people to participate in a capitalist system that debases them in real terms.

We must also start to question the assumptions that lead us to believe the innate quality of certain elite institutions. When dismal reports are published about how few working-class, state school and minority candidates are accepted into places like Oxford and Cambridge, the burden is still nevertheless placed at the door of the excluded. Rather than painting the admissions criteria as deficient in its overemphasis on a very narrow set of attributes that are common to the middle and upper classes, the message is always the same: working-class children need to learn to become more confident and to more closely resemble their middle-class and privately-educated peers in speech and delivery. This, we are told, is the necessary route to success, at the expense of any measure of altruism, kindness or compassion. And while we read opinion pieces all the time about the need to overhaul and strip out prejudice from these hulking great prestigious institutions, I would argue that we are essentially missing the point by even conceiving of them as prestigious, thereby perpetuating their power and ability to wield elitism. What will it take for us to realise that the idea of confidence is one fixed and defined by reigning powers that need to be dismantled through ridicule and loss of respect? That humility, and being observant, fastidious, caring and concerned for others are far more important than one's ability to confidently handle a job interview?

Because the one lesson I've learned from being exposed to some of these places is that the prejudice being reported isn't incidental to, or separate from, the institution, but paramount to its continued existence and success. If we are truly going to challenge the assumptions of capitalism, then we must begin with the behaviours lauded by employers and dictated by the market leaders in education. The more we do this, the more we demystify and thus dismantle the mythological supremacy of not only private schools and Oxbridge, but also the establishment media outlets who hire disproportionately from this pool of candidates.

This is the first act of theft that will be necessary in truly overhauling the current climate and creating a legitimate challenge to a neoliberal culture: decolonizing our thinking and stripping these elite institutions of their respect, prestige and revenue. Having understood the mechanisms by which some of the market leaders in the media, arts and culture seek to secure their own futures and perpetuate the myth of their superiority for the sake of justifying their continued existence, we begin to naturally start questioning their supposed authority. We can take this one step further by cancelling our various subscriptions, boycotting their programming and investing our time and resources on cultural output of a more authentic and grassroots variety. As writers, artists, musicians, and film-makers we must also contribute more to independent organisations — publishing houses, record labels, production companies, magazines, broadcasters and gallery spaces — that have proliferated in recent years thanks to the efforts of hardworking visionary people with a view to helping us transform our collective culture. Not relying on the off-chance that the establishment will permit us access, and judging ourselves to be deficient or to have failed if they don't, but being vigilant to their often highly rigged selection and hiring policies, and rejecting the logic of their highly proscriptive rules of taste.

The stigma of self-publishing must be eradicated, and is being, by a younger generation who seem to be embracing it more fervently and without the residual shame felt by those graduates of the Lost Decade, trapped between the hope of a more egalitarian future and an elitist past built on notions of social mobility. We have to dispense with the notion that without endorsement by a major corporation, our creative efforts are null and void, or else spend the rest of our lives communicating nothing. Capitalism might debase us in almost every other way, but we cannot allow it to steal our means of expression when alternative avenues are available, simply because of our own outdated dependency on a rigged system of validation. There is little point in waiting around for your dreams to be made real by an industry perpetually resistant to change. The first step to creating radical work that challenges the current cultural hegemony is to part with whatever sense of superior quality or prestige we currently attribute to these organisations.

In consuming culture, too, we must apply the same conscientiousness that we do to buying products, not accepting the *stack them high and sell them cheap* model by which we default to the same, old tired institutions, but being more selective and discerning. For a long time the *Guardian* has worked on the assumption that with no legitimate challenger to the mainstream media, its broadly centrist, neoliberal agenda can be passed off as left-wing, and as a lazy consumer, for years I read it in lieu of having found any better alternatives. But it’s time to turn our attentions instead to the challengers, of which there are many: *New Socialist, Jacobin, Novara* and *Huck Magazine*, to name a few. Over time, and with greater financial support from their readers, these outlets can begin to tackle the mainstream agenda in a way that will build on the groundswell we observed in the lead up to the 2017 general election, with the hope of reaching more people up and down the country than ever before. Without the same financial security, these places at present lack the kind of advertising revenue of the big media companies, and the ability to attract the same kind of high-profile writers, musicians, artists and spokespeople to whom we defer for our cultural and political commentary. So we must subsidise our earnings by stealing, unapologetically, from the corporate world; doing the bare minimum in exchange for money that we feel no moral objection in taking and either investing it, or using the freedom it affords us to contribute to these alternative outlets.

This will constitute the second act of theft. No meaningful challenge to either the political or cultural hegemony will ever be achieved if those seeking to carry it out are suffering under the perpetual anxiety of not being able to make rent. Ultimately, the extent to which we engage with the capitalist system in the first instance won't have any bearing on our ability to dismantle it. This, I believe, has been a major oversight of the left-wing cause, which has broadly and needlessly suffered under the burden of living off paltry newspaper commissioning fees, for example, in the false belief that this constitutes a more noble, and less hypocritical economic model, than temping in an office, doing freelance corporate work, or even doing shifts in a pub. There will be some, lucky supporters of the left who are able to forge authentic careers in this way, but we can't all rely on that model. With the exception of industries trading directly in human misery — the arms trade, for example, and most betting companies — there should be no guilt for having to resort to whatever means necessary to survive the market economy, particularly for those whose backgrounds were often unstable and precarious.

In fact, that experience can not only provide you with the financial security to pursue more creative goals, but also furnish you with experience that will allow you to better understand the mechanisms by which the neoliberal system operates. For some, it will be possible to also do this in a way that undermines businesses so large and so unwieldy that they will hardly notice your half-completed efforts as hired staff or freelancers — and even more for the fact that, under the plethora of what David Graeber has termed “bullshit jobs”, there are few real ways of even measuring our performance. This, I should add, is a privilege of anyone able to work within certain areas of the service sector, and specifically the so-called “creative industries”, as performance targets are a tyranny of low-paid retail and hospitality work that must not be underestimated. But should you be lucky enough to find yourself being courted by the creative industries for the purposes of mining your creative talent, remember that it is built on hot air and stupidity, making it ripe for exploitation by a shrewd impostor wanting to subsidise their earnings while freelancing or self-publishing work that ultimately serves to discredit and undermine it. I would recommend doing so without remorse.

With the exception of anyone working for a left-wing publication, think-tank or other organisation directly involved in the dismantling of neoliberal politics, I would also strongly recommend that you don’t accept the paltry salaries of cultural organisations operating at the same level of any other corporate entity but paying far below a liveable wage on the assertion that the perks and prestige they offer amounts to a fair substitute. This constitutes an act of internalised capitalism arguably even greater than the far more transactional approach of treating work like work and taking as much as you can. See money as an unfortunate necessity that you will have to devote some time to accruing in order to survive, but resist the urge to comply with its attendant jargon and camaraderie. Smile and nod and take your pay packet at the end of the month and negotiate as much as you can from your employers, who, you must remember, do not own the right to your sense of guilt or embarrassment; whilst at the same time defending your most deeply held sense of self and identity from the psychobabble that seeks to supplant your grip on reality.

The third act of theft comes from cultivating new communities and nurturing those existing communities to which you belong, by stealing the same exclusionary methods of the establishment to use against it. The modern workplace and the rhetoric around social mobility would have us feel ashamed and slightly embarrassed of the families, friends and neighbourhoods who's shared vernacular is the source of our essential identity; and resisting that logic will be essential for challenging the neoliberal system that degrades and humiliates us. So continue to speak in your mother tongue, be that linguistic or accented, in the way that the corporate world and elite institutions have alienated the working-class for decades by using corporate jargon to confound and confuse. Do this as frequently as you can around your boss, who can never be seen to discriminate against you for this reason, but will come to fear you and your mysterious modes of expression. Use it as well in the work you create and put out into the world. Use the internet, harnessing the mimetics of social media to create rapid linguistic change and complex constructions specific to your small community for the purposes of confounding the broadsheet commentators looking on and frantically trying to catch up with every search entry made into urbandictionary.com.

Just as the British establishment has been successful in anthropologizing almost any cultural phenomenon that diverts from its highly prescriptive hegemony, so the working and lower-middle classes can also begin to do the same: using the same methods of clinical analysis and taking our newly attained education to subject the upper classes to the same degradation they have been administering for centuries. In our work, we must steal their tendency to coolly dissect phenomena that appears distant and strange to them, exposing all of the absurdities and false assumptions that perpetuate a highly elitist and discriminatory society.

In so doing we will most likely stumble into the fourth act of theft, which is archaeological. In neoliberalism's march to conquer nearly all aspects of contemporary culture, stories of working-class and marginalised communities have been quashed and forgotten, creating an orphan generation unsure of its own identity and place in history. Crucial to challenging the current status quo will be the effort to instate more working-class history and storytelling, for the purposes of lending younger generations some legacy and sense of belonging. Read and share books by obscure working-class authors, and do the same with music and film, while letting it shape the work that you create, whose aesthetics and vernacular can't help but be informed by this alternative viewpoint. Because, in the steady march to supplant the status quo, it will not just be polemics such as this (or lectures or think-tank reports) that will be crucial, but a visual language and mode of expression that sits far closer to the lived experience of the majority. Anyone working in this effort will be contributing to the political project of challenging neoliberalism, and unpicking its attendant rules of taste.

You will not achieve any of this by trying to deny and iron out the feeling of impostordom that courses through your veins every time you set foot into your workplace, or the halls of your university, or the cultural institutions ordained by the establishment. You will only achieve it by embracing that feeling and learning how to process it without shame. In my own case at least, I've used it to better detect the many ways in which the workplace seeks to degrade and stifle who I am. I have tried, wherever possible, to remain as transactional in my treatment of my employers as they are with me, resisting the call from bosses to socialise and devote any more time than is necessary to the purposes of an organisation that doesn't value me beyond my contribution. I have written this book in the offices of large companies while charging them a day rate for my services, doing the agreed amount of work (and no more) before taking my laptop to sit in the canteen and quietly watch. This sense of impostordom is based on a refusal to be grateful for the opportunities that others were afforded at birth. Crucially, this shouldn't encroach on our most deeply-held, spiritual, religious or otherwise fundamental sense of gratitude, which is paramount to any sense of contentment, or peace, but in the very specific way that we relate to the professional, corporate and capitalist world.

In this sense, what I am advocating for is a radical redistribution of opportunity, not just along financial lines — which I believe will come as a result of, and work in tandem with, these goals — but of cultural output and in the self-determination of working- and lower-middle-class communities. What I am advocating for is the chance for real people to share real stories, tell real jokes and share real music in a vernacular that is understood by the majority of people alive in this wild west of a free-market economy and under the auspices of a governing class that hasn't the first idea how to relate to it. Unlike the radical redistribution of wealth that will require new policies and new taxation laws, we already have all of the necessary tools for creating a radically new culture, and now simply have to dispense with whatever residual prestige we hold for the old cultural institutions that serve as gatekeepers to the mainstream, and which continually exclude any challenger.

To do this, it's essential to remember that in the market economy, you — your body and your mind — are no more than a commodity in the eyes of your employer, and that any attempt they might make to improve your wellbeing is for the sake of securing profit.

Retain that sense of impostordom, and through it watch the many ways in which the corporate workspace and its attendants dismiss the legitimacy of you and your culture. Watch how your manager talks to the cleaners who attend to his desk. How he speaks to tradespeople on the phone and complains about the transport staff who assisted his journey into work. Watch him try to cultivate friendships with his employees for the sake of ensuring a smooth working relationship, and in spite of all the quiet ways in which he will exploit them at the first given opportunity, like insisting on overtime that is never remunerated and sending them halfway across the world to traipse the hallways of soulless conference centres and laugh at the very idea that this could ever be presented as a perk. Watch as your boss tries to be more relatable by lampooning a black culture that he otherwise fears in his day-to-day life spent in the sterile, white-washed environs of his twee Victorian terraced house; as he ironically, and drunkenly, delivers renditions of hip-hop and RnB songs during the annual Christmas party, his go-to numbers being Wu-Tang’s “Pinky Ring” or Lauryn Hill’s “Doo-Wop” — songs he pretended to enjoy during his three years of fun at university. Watch him with a coolness and a distance that allows you to keenly exploit him in the same way that he is exploiting you. Take your money and run, is what I’m saying, without ever getting sucked into the softer parts of the corporate culture that are really nothing more than a thinly veiled attempt to make the process of abasement necessitated by the modern workplace more amenable and friendly. This will be particularly relevant to the kinds of workplace emerging in the tech and creative industries, whose “crew-neck capitalism” belies a more dehumanizing kind than the earlier suit-and-briefcase version.

With this approach, you will be able to better navigate a system that most of us are sadly all forced to partake in, using the experience as a way of learning the systems of capitalism in order to dismantle them. With that money and in your spare time, find ways of putting that experience as an impostor to good use: writing about your experiences, harnessing the dynamics you witness to mount political movements and build shared communities with a view to creating a more empowered workforce; working with journalists to expose illegal and exploitative behaviours. Wherever possible, do this on the company’s time. Join a union and work with their teams to establish what you can and can’t say in the public domain; and keep donating part of that money to your socialist representatives in parliament, whose assumption of power will be the quickest and most reliable way of ensuring that justice for all of us who are dehumanized by these corporate entities is finally brought to bear.

What Next?*

The experiences of the majority have been pushed incrementally to the margins of our culture thanks to a combination of entrenched elitism and increased risk-aversion following the financial crisis of 2008. In real terms, this has meant a collapsing of the gap between the powers governing our economy and politics, and one of the primary means for policing and keeping them in check. Where the media and our arts institutions might have once, and to varying extents, served as a counterpoint and agitator to the formal disciplines of power, in recent years they have become increasingly complicit in the neoliberal project, serving as the soft-power limb of an economic and political agenda that seeks to divorce objects, ideas and words from any greater meaning beyond their market value.

All of this matters not only because it debases our culture — an arguably sentimental consideration when compared with the practical matter of economics and survival — but because it also undermines the very basis of democracy, which relies on a free and independent media to empower the electorate in making sound political judgements. It's a legitimate criticism often waged at the post-Soviet space that a state-controlled media constitutes a corruption of the democratic system. And yet, while it might sound extreme to say on account of our own false sense of immunity to these forces of corruption, our own media has succumbed to an unprecedented level of nepotism and elitism whose effects are arguably similar. The diminishing socio-economic experience that now informs the vast majority of our media, comprised of the same alumni networks as those in government, is a free media in name alone. And while it hardly requires me to make the case against Fox News and the Murdoch empire, whose corrupt workings are well exposed, the collusion between political power and even the ostensible liberal media through unchallenged and increasingly homogeneous rules of taste has also rendered meaningful debate impossible and prevented any new ideas from making headway into the mainstream.

While we analyse the causes of this phenomenon, its effects have already been felt in the daily lives of working-class people, whose culture has become increasingly mocked and derided. If pop culture had once been defined by the concessions it made to a loud, proud and outspoken working class, then over time it has shifted towards a more voyeuristic and condescending model. The criticism might well be indirect, but it is time to wake up to the impact of reality TV shows aimed at showcasing the working classes as a spectacle of moral rot, for example, which over time have understandably contributed to working-class resentment of the establishment, while the lifestyles of the more affluent are usually always presented in exclusively positive terms.

What's more, at its core, neoliberalism rewards the strong, which by extension and in cultural terms translates to an endless perpetuation of the status quo. By reverse, any challenge to its authority can be dismissed offhand on the grounds of having no inherent value or worth. Therefore, if Hall's "great moving right show" saw a concerted effort to usher in right-wing policies under the guise of a more egalitarian and inclusive agenda than the earlier Christian strains of political conservativism, then what has ensued since Blair has been an endless glitch or malfunction, as any attempt to accurately assess the situation faltered under accusations of extremity and madness. As a result, these criticisms had defaulted to a style of self-censorship and despair manifesting in so-called "irony poisoning", which has been exacerbated by the fact that any form of rebellion, protest, adversity and challenge to the status quo has been commoditised by advertisers and marketing execs to achieve the ends of capitalism. This has the effect of instantly softening its effects and resulting in a cultural climate of immense insincerity that breeds bitterness, paranoia and mistrust. In creating a semantic vacuum capable of swallowing any predating value system or moral framework, neoliberalism has also been successful in positing class — and by extension, good taste — as the *de facto* metric of quality, transforming our conceptions of art and culture to the extent that the studied tropes of the establishment now constitute great art.

This might not seem like a particularly newsworthy or controversial point, until you consider the fact that art has always been broadly defined as antithetical to taste, characterised by its ability to challenge, subvert and ultimately transform our most deeply held beliefs and assumptions. In fact, it's the normalisation of this phenomenon that is perhaps most telling of all about the success of late capitalism in conquering our critical faculties.

Diversity and inclusion quotas will never redress this problem for the fundamental fact that inclusion is itself the product of an empiricism whose origins lie in neoliberal and capitalist thinking, placing emphasis solely on the external signifiers of diversity which have historically been undervalued in the marketplace: skin colour being the most obvious example, but also dress code, accent, vocabulary, etc. In this dynamic, the altruistic father figure generously extends opportunity to the working classes without ever having to question his own authority, and is free to reward himself in the role of caregiver. But the clue's in the name. This isn't a chance to transform the status quo, as the father figure's generosity necessarily dictates conformity to his rules. Instead, it's an invitation to enter a system that has historically devalued the communities from which these "minority" candidates emerge, and to make only the most incremental of changes to it through whatever degree of change is permitted by it's defensive rules of good taste, decency and moral acceptance.

Real change will therefore need to come from outside, and what few opportunities exist for transformation only become apparent to us when we start to trust the feeling of impostordom that we've been told to resist and overcome. This is the force that will allow us to mount an alternative to the neoliberal agenda and challenge the gatekeepers of culture whose authority is based on ever-shakier foundations. The liberal media is well aware that it has painted itself into a corner, and to secure its survival must placate the braying mob gathered outside its doors by a variety of different means. Cosplaying as the working class is one such method used by the middle-class ascendants to the highest ranks of the media, advertising and art institutions, disguising their own privilege by wearing tracksuits and talking in mockney accents. The second is to become increasingly benign and good-mannered. They have no choice, after all. The economic downturn, along with a radical transformation in the types of people obtaining further and higher education, has forced a degree of interrogration of the dubious methods by which the establishment accrued its wealth and status, thereby sparking a long overdue reflection on the crimes of colonialism, Reaganism and Thatcherism and their residual effects on the socio-economic tapestry of modern life. With the daily reminder of this fact provided by the internet, the media can no longer function with the arrogance that it once did with its imperialist assumptions intact.

While there's the gnawing sense that the establishment is therefore running out of things to say, it is nevertheless saying them with a frenzied determination, churning out books and op-eds on an ever more obscure list of (non-) subjects ranging from *How My Obsession With Le Creuset Revealed the Depths to Which My Marriage Had Been Plunged* to *The Mental Health Benefits of Cross-Stitch*. These offerings are always justified with the sly insinuation that benign art and literature constitutes good taste, and any criticism countered with the fact that, for example, book sales are on the rise. But using market reasoning to justify the validity of art and culture seems paradoxical. Books *per se* are not valuable, so much as their function in the delivery of important and essential information; information capable of shaping political movements and uniting disparate people. If the notion of a canon existed for any reason, then it was to preserve this idea.

Besides *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race,* whose author Reni Eddo-Lodge deserves every accolade going for being able to successfully infiltrate the mainstream to the extent that she has, when did we last have a literary offering that caused as much controversy, or made as direct and pernicious an assault on the establishment, as the more experimental literature and fiction of the 1980s and 1990s? In fact, to protect the myth of its superior judgement, the media and publishing industries seem less inclined to issue work that makes any direct accusations, and resorts increasingly to a style of output that is ever more obscure, erudite and impenetrable to a mass audience. This is also borne of the fact that a growing number of artists and musicians receiving accolades over the past decade have hailed from aristocratic and upper-middle-class families with ties to the art world, academia and the intelligentsia.

We cannot rely on inclusion to overhaul a cultural climate whose elite power structures have been protected through a defence of rigid good taste principles. During the boom periods of the 1990s, when the illusion of endless growth allowed industries across the board to take greater and greater risks, these institutions were free to loosen their commissioning principles to allow for the telling of more working-class stories. But the period of stagnation since the financial crisis has exposed these industries for what they are — nepotistic, elitist and intimately tied to systems of financialised power. Any real challenge to the status quo and the hegemonic media will therefore be required to exert the dialogue, symbolism and vernacular of the working classes once again, but with a force that is currently not permitted by the establishment routes. This will only be achieved by stealing the same tools that have been used to ostracise the working class for decades.

First, it means dispensing with whatever sense of residual prestige we might have once attributed to the establishment organisations governing our culture. Second, it means taking this sense of irreverence and using it to coldly exploit the capitalist system to our advantage, treating employment in a way that is purely transactional and, where possible, charging as much as we can, while using that money to support and fund organisations dedicated to dismantling it. Thirdly, it means stealing the mechanisms of exclusion that have been used against the working class for decades, to undermine and humiliate the establishment, and in so doing, reinstating the audaciousness of the working-class voice, that was never so sharp and never so witty as when it was directed towards the capitalist class. And finally, and archaeologically, it means excavating the history of working-class and marginal communities and doggedly highlighting and problematizing the illegitimate aspects of Britain's classist and colonial heritage.

All of this will only be achieved by rejecting any notion of impostor syndrome, and the countless other pathologies aimed at making us internalise the deliberate alienation of the working-class experience. Or perhaps, to be more accurate, by actively embracing our impostordom and wearing it as a badge of honour with which to scare the capitalist class into the swaddling bosom of its Kirsty Allsopp home furnishings. Only then can we begin to reject the morality of the modern workplace and exploit corporate power for our own gains without any sense of guilt or embarrassment. All the while remaining vigilant to the countless ways that neoliberalism is acting on us, and being wary of the people who subscribe, uncritically, to its logic.

All of this we must do on a diet of Pret sandwiches that we'll forget to pay for, just like yesterday's and the day before's. Stretching out on the green spaces they commandeered and tried to sell back to us during the lunch breaks that we’ll enjoy far past their allotted hour. All the while watching carefully, taking notes, and hopefully creating the next phase of cultural output, defined by its commitment to tell things as they really were, and as we really felt them.

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