

***Chavs: The Demonization of the Working  
Class* by Owen Jones**

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Released in Summer 2011 and now in its second edition, *Chavs* is Owen Jones' attempt to help rescussitate debate around class within mainstream outdated concept and political discourse.

Broadly speaking, it is focused on the fate of working class communities in Britain since the Thatcher era and the disappearance of working class political representation, and puts forward some possible ideas to envision a renewed class politics for today. The book has proven a popular one and has propelled its author's public status as a prominent left-wing commentator, and one of the main voices of initiatives to reclaim the Labour Party as a working class organisation.

As Jones is quick to point out in the preface to the new edition, had it been released a couple of years earlier, when class denial was still a more viable ideological line, then *Chavs* would likely have remained a more obscure work. But, given its convergence with the current crisis and the riots that spread throughout various British cities last August, *Chavs* arrived on the market at a time when issues of wealth and power have become far more pressing to a wider public. That said, no matter how many new billionaires this crisis has managed to create, the author is well aware that much of society's frustrations can still more easily be channelled against 'welfare dependents', as it can against powerful elites.

The book offers a thorough mapping of how the neoliberal project has taken shape in Britain. It documents the shifts in social structure brought about by the steep decline of traditional industries and with them, trade unions, the corresponding rise of the service industries and the increasing dominance of the financial sector. These are related to changes in popular cultural and political discourse, centred on the mantras of individual aspiration and personal responsibility, showing how the forms of exclusion and inequality that are the effects of deindustrialisation and the chasm it left behind are today explained in terms of their 'anti-social' symptoms. One familiar example: if people are unemployed, it's because they're too lazy to get a job, not because of the lack of jobs.

It is a credit to the author that he's managed to cover so much material in a style that is clear and easy to read, incorporating a broad stock of secondary research to support his own case studies on the media, the party system, changes in occupation and the emergence of the 'flexible' workforce, education and cultural capital, the post-welfare vacuum, and the rise of far-right politics.

Indeed, every chapter could be read in its own right as a primer on class in each of these areas of society.

## **'Middle Britain'**

The title, *Chavs*, was chosen because, according to Jones, it encapsulates the kind of class disdain that has become totally acceptable in much of British culture over the last 30 years. In a culture increasingly more dominated by middle-class ideals, the world 'below' this norm is framed as one of feckless single-mothers, hoodied teenagers and welfare dependants, living undisciplined lives on council estates and in high-rise tower blocks.

The core myths on which this 'middle Britain' consensus is based are that 'we are all middle-class now', that class is an outdated concept and that social problems can be explained as the moral or even genetic failings of individuals or families. To understand how these ideas have become so normalised, it is necessary to see them as a symptom of the broader social changes

that have taken place in Britain since the 1970's and how the ideals of the welfare state have been supplanted by free-market individualism.

Jones develops his argument by first leading the reader through an analysis of the media, examining the ideological role it plays in imprinting the myth that most people now live cosy middle-class lives except for 'a problematic 'chav rump' left on the wrong side of history.' It is a clever way to open up the study, as it builds on the most familiar of images and narratives we are fed today, situating media production and consumption in a wider context, and illustrating the political function of such representations.

His analysis of popular culture covers everything from the relative absence of plausible working class characters on television, to the gross marketisation of English football as a global brand, that has ultimately excluded a whole swath of supporters who can no longer afford to go see their local team.

## **Farewell to the Working Class?**

Probably the most substantial and valuable sections of the book try to answer the question of just who is the working class today. Jones is well aware that the working class could never be defined as homogeneous, that there 'have always been different groups within it, not all of whom have sat comfortably together'. Taking a definition of working class in both material terms of having to sell one's labour on the market, with little autonomy over this labour, and also in cultural terms as something that shapes one's identity, sense of history, place, language, shared experience and expectations of life, Jones attempts to give a sketch of today's working conditions and the shape of communities that were once centred around the factory, the mine or the docks. What we find is a fragmented class certainly no more homogeneous than at other phases in recent history, yet whose interests can still be broadly defined as antagonistic to those of a small minority who benefit most off their labour – waged or otherwise.

Though he doesn't reduce an understanding of class to simply income levels, income is obviously a key factor, and statistically, the median household-income in Britain is £21,000 – already a drastically lower figure than one might expect from the elusive ideal of 'middle Britain'.

While necessary attention is given to the fact that 8 million people are still employed in some form of manual occupation, Jones does not dispute the relative disappearance of traditional industrial occupations and the rootedness that went with them. The real dramatic figures are to be found in the number of people employed in service sector work, predominantly in retail, call-centres and public services where a further 8 million people are now employed.

This economy is one of a very different character to that on which the dominant images of the 'traditional' working class are based. For starters, women now make up a huge share of the wage-labour market. Also, most of the gains of the labour movement have been pulled from under these workers. Many are employed on 'temp' contracts, often through agencies, or on a part-time basis and are non-unionised, all of which contribute to greater precarity in terms of workplace rights and overall social security.

Jones looks at the conditions in which most service sector work is done, their authoritarian style of management and regimentation and, in particular, the effects on the health of call centre workers and increasing stress levels on workers generally, induced by the simultaneous extension and fragmentation of the working day. These issues are approached from the point of view of

not only needing to understand contemporary working conditions, but to specifically highlight the particular forms of alienation and exploitation that even the cleanest and less physically arduous jobs entail, and what prospects they present in terms of workers getting organised.

## **Taking Stock**

One of his conclusions on these issues is that a 'blue-uniformed male factory worker with a union card in his pocket might have been an appropriate symbol for the working class of the 1950s. A low-paid, part-time, female shelf-stacker would certainly not be unrepresentative of the same class today'. To help construct a more formidable class politics, the left itself needs to look at how its own romanticisation of the former plays into its irrelevance in the eyes of the latter.

The remainder of these sections of Jones's investigation draws out the hypocrisy of the language of 'meritocracy' that has been used to rationalise increasing inequality in Britain. The basic strategy of this ideology is one that denies any kind of structural analysis in favour of moralising about the personal responsibilities of individuals. Social problems are explained at the level of the individual – their lack of discipline or enterprise – while more social resources such as healthcare and education are opened up to commodification.

Capitalism's major victory over the last three decades has been to dismantle labour's power in the West through many of the processes mentioned above, and with the major growth of financial capitalism and wage repression, to proliferate easy credit and mortgage schemes that have lumped unseemly amounts of debt on to individual households. The few benefits gained at the level of production (or service provision) are recuperated at the level of consumption – and this in a society where you are now expected to consume education, consume healthcare and so on.

Even where the state still provides some semblance of social support for citizens, it is often on terms that are more favourable to capital, for example, in supplementing private landlords through housing benefit while effectively going on strike in terms of building council housing. Indeed, many of the most poverty-stricken households covered in Jones's study are those who bought into the 'right-to-buy' schemes first rolled out under Thatcher, which helped set the tone for the continuing privatisation of council housing today.

In the section entitled, 'A Rigged Society', Jones also illustrates not only the economic boundaries that underlie a society rationalised in terms of individual merit, but also how cultural, habitual tendencies debar many working class people from even considering that they might enter into educational institutions or pursue certain career paths. In this discussion of the cultural and social capital of the middle classes, Jones shows the processes that go far beyond economic understandings about formal equality of access to institutions. He shows the subtlety of how class is reproduced through the maintenance of spaces of privilege which many people of a lower socio-economic position or sense of status would not conceive of stepping into. These tendencies are not something that the social circles of left-wing politics are exempt of. They should inform our understandings of privilege within our own movements and questions over who can participate and who gets to define the problems and "solutions" for oppressed social groups.

## Dark Days

Another chapter focuses on the rise of the far-right in Britain, particularly in the shape of the British National Party's electoral successes in former Labour-dominated constituencies. Jones argues that it is the material issues of scarce affordable housing and secure employment that have provided the root conditions for this reactionary turn, and that discussion of the racism that the BNP thrives off must be framed within this context. The BNP have thrived by racialising these issues – in the context of a broader, liberal multicultural discourse that ignores class – presenting themselves as the voice of the “white minority”.

One missed opportunity of this chapter is that, ironically, it is pretty much told from the perspective of the majority-white people who have witnessed the failures of New Labour and the welfare state and the fragmentation of their communities, but doesn't engage us with the views of those minorities who are the actual targets of far-right groups or the populist discourses around Islamophobia and ‘the immigrant infestation’. This absence gives too much primacy to the class issue in this case and doesn't let us consider the complexity of racism and its intersection with other forms of oppression.

Chavs is a densely-packed book, but not an impenetrable read. There is barely the space here to point out half of the book's strengths, let alone take issue with it in any substantial way. This review is mostly focused on relaying the primary economic changes that are documented in the book, and the analysis of the BNP's rising popularity, only a few fragments of the overall picture offered.

As the author has stated, it is meant as a contribution towards encouraging real debate around class and to promote left-wing ideas while the left is dramatically weak. I think this is what it should be taken up as, ideally as a step towards a more prominent focus on class and class struggle, and not as the book to understand the whole issue.

## Beyond the State

For those who don't see the route for emancipatory political projects in claiming state power, under any banner, there are issues with this work which should be taken up critically. (Though there is little sense in stringently arguing that this or that remains under-theorised, as the book is not meant as a theoretical work.) In this context, it is best to flag up some of the assumptions or partialities of Jones's position.

While rightly seeing New Labour and Blairism as symptomatic of the dominance of free-market politics on a scale far wider than Britain, Jones's treatment of the Labour Party pitches them as an organisation that has otherwise consistently represented working class interests until their degeneration into New Labour. Historically, this can be challenged both in terms of internal and external policy.

Although the traditional class alliances nationally of the Tories and Labour in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century are illustrated in one chapter, the main timeline of the book stretches from the 1970's to the present day. The role of the state itself is not scrutinised in Chavs beyond showing how it has been used to administer the ‘Thatcherite agenda’, and should be reclaimed for working class interests. While not romanticising the days of the welfare state, we are not given much critical discussion of such models in the context of the broader historical and geographical development

of capitalism, past, present or future. This makes it difficult to grasp what social ideal Jones would advocate in terms of the goal for present-day movements of an internationalist perspective. The book's focus is confined to the island of Britain, though the fact that Northern Ireland doesn't feature is as much reflective of the very contradictions of the British state's territories, as any flaw in the validity of looking at the social and economic processes that have taken place in England, Scotland and Wales over the last three decades.

The political history of Northern Ireland is only one site among countless others that can offer arguments for why the very existence of states should be challenged – for reasons that the Labour Party are not exempt of.

The narrative of the breakdown of the welfare state is also one where, entwined with the gains of feminist movements, women become more visible in terms of their accommodation within the waged-labour system. On this, it is important that it is not just inclusion in the labour market that influences some crude understanding of women as paid-up members of the class struggle within the left. Capitalism has required a sexual division of labour that has confined women to the private sphere of reproduction – a role that has been legitimised as natural or voluntary – providing the system with its most crucial commodity, a workforce.

We need to be vigilant in order that the invisible phases in this history should feature equally as accounts of working class experience and shape our theory and praxis. Without doing so, our attempts to prefigure a society that can transcend capital and the state's divisions will always be partial.

Overall, Chavs gives us a tangible insight to the dynamics of class decomposition since the 1970's. Jones offers compelling evidence of the need for an organised opposition to the particular conditions that neoliberalism has established. He has shown the degrees of atomisation, thwarted aspiration and disillusionment that have developed in Britain, which make cohesive forms of class solidarity seem all the more elusive. It is a sincere work that poses many practical questions around the issue of class politics today, ideas it would seem will have some real currency to the left of Ed Milliband's "one nation" Labour approach.

For those who want to see class shed its status in the popular imagination as an idea of the past and to construct a revolutionary politics for today, the task should be to see that those most effected by these conditions are the ones setting the terms of any such debate and struggle. For that, we need to look to where the foundation for such forms of solidarity and resistance already exist, and build from there.

For further discussion on the politics of 'chav' hatred, see: [badreputation.org.uk/2011/08/30/is-chav-a-feminist-issue/](http://badreputation.org.uk/2011/08/30/is-chav-a-feminist-issue/) and [ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/beautiful-transgressions-8/](http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/beautiful-transgressions-8/)

For analysis of similar issues to those addressed by Jones, but in an Irish context, check out: [rabble.ie/2011/09/30/media-rte-scum](http://rabble.ie/2011/09/30/media-rte-scum)

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