**Why Everyday Life Matters:**

**Class, Community and Making Life Livable**

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**Abstract**

This article argues that studying everyday life is valuable because it makes sociologists attend

to the routine and temporal aspects of social life. The ‘everyday’ brings the seasons of society

into view. It also brings to the fore how liveable lives are made in the midst of the social damage

produced by widening class divisions. Drawing lessons from Erving Goffman’s sociology, the article

argues that attending to everyday life necessitates developing an eye for detail and attentiveness

to the seemingly unimportant. It is also argued that central to the study of everyday life is the

relationship between history, culture, class and biography. These arguments are illustrated

through a discussion of a working-class estate in Croydon, south London where residents light

up their home at Christmas in ‘chromatic surplus’.

**Keywords**

Christmas, class, community, everyday life

**Introduction: An Eye for the Seemingly Unimportant**

There is something vaguely oxymoronic about the idea of everyday life. Is there any

form of life that does not happen everyday? The obvious exception is our own death,

which of course will only happen once. Regardless, the value of thinking about the everyday

is that it signals the routine and unfolding aspects of social life. It makes sociologists

think about society not as a set of structural arrangements but as a moving and

dynamic entity that has a rhythm and a temporality. As a result, everyday life helps the

seasons of society to come into view.

Focusing on everyday life allows us to attend to the inherent liveliness of social life

and its time signatures. This is the first reason why everyday life matters: it makes us

take the mundane seriously and ask what is at stake in our daily encounters with neighbours

or the people we brush past at the bus stop. It also means we have to think about

the wider spectrum of life experiences from the despair and social damage to the ordinary

triumphs of getting by (see Miller, 2008). Ken Plummer puts it well, ‘Our everyday

life drips with stories of how people live and love, work and play, hate and die’ (Plummer,

2013: 506).

In what follows I will make an argument for why the sociology of everyday life is

important and how cultivating a sociological sensibility allows us to remark on what is

otherwise passed over as unremarkable. In order to do this, I want to focus on the seasons

of social life in a particular place, namely a council estate in south London called New

Addington. It is the place where my family was allocated a flat in 1966, a few days

before England’s fabled victory in the World Cup. Until the age of 18 I was a resident and

since then have visited my extended family there each weekend and remained connected

to the life of its people. I was a student of the social rhythms of the estate long before

becoming a sociologist but this landscape has been an empirical touchstone for my sociological

imagination (see Back, 2007). So, it is hard to separate where my life ends and

research methods begin.

Before taking you to deepest Croydon, I want to review some key insights provided

by the sociology of the everyday in order to show why this is important for the contemporary

analysis of social class. From here the article will explore how insights into the

deep structures of class-based society can be read from a cultural biography of a single

council estate. I want to use the festive glow of the garishly decorated working-class

homes to examine the relationship between class, culture and the changing politics of

housing. As Tim Edensor and Steve Millington have shown, festive excess in matters of

decoration mark out working-class homes for middle-class disgust and stigma (Edensor

and Millington, 2009: 105).

In the course of the research I conducted two photographic surveys of festive decorations

on the estate during December 2013 and 2014. Additionally, archival research was

conducted on the history of the estate focusing particularly on community magazines

including the ATOM (Addington Tenants Own Magazine ) which first published in

September 1938 and provided a space to document the social life of the estate for over

20 years. The focus of this article is a single family – the Hopkinsons – with whom I

conducted qualitative interviews (both in person and via email) and participant observation

over the course of two years. Given the prominence of the family I have used their

real names with their consent. Additional, contextual ethnographic work was also done

during this period and here the identities of these residents are anonymised. What I will

foreground is how these seasonal rituals reveal the ways in which contemporary class

distinctions are made but also how an attention to them alerts us to solidarities that are

formed and sustained through time.

Erving Goffman is arguably the greatest 20th century sociologist of everyday life

(Goffman, 1959, 1997). His artful prose style and unnerving ability to unlock society’s secrets meant he did not fit easily within post Second World War sociology in America.

Goffman’s gift for making the familiar fascinating did not sit easily with the search for replicable methods of investigation (Morrison, 2003). For Graham Crow, sociology in

Goffman’s work is a matter of developing ‘an eye for detail’ and the art of precise observation

(Crow, 2005: 106). Goffman’s thought offers a series of important principles in

approaching the study of everyday life. The first of these is to develop attentiveness to

what is easily discarded as unimportant .

Interestingly this quality is particularly appreciated by Goffman’s non-sociological

readership. One example is the Yorkshire playwrite and novelist Alan Bennett. An avid

Goffman reader, Bennett once commented in a review, ‘Sociology begins in the dustbin

and sociologists have always been licensed rag-and-bone men [and women] trundling

their carts round the backyards of the posher academic establishments’ (Bennett, 1981:

12). This is certainly one very appealing warrant for the sociological vocation, a collector

of the discarded and the enchantment of the mundane.

Sociology has no privileged claim on everyday life. As Sarah Pink argues, a wide

variety of academic disciplines have trained their attention on everyday life from anthropology,

geography and philosophy (Pink, 2012). She is particularly critical of authors

within cultural studies who suggest that everyday life has for the most part ‘avoided

scrutiny’ (Highmore, 2002: vii; see also Moran, 2005). She argues convincingly that

ethnographic methods, for more than a century across the social sciences, have been

concerned with everyday life and appeals for a linking up of ‘these bodies of work theoretically

or empirically’ (Pink, 2012: 7). This is particularly important for understanding

how class is experienced and how these feelings are structured historically.

It is surprising given what I have argued that Pink makes no mention of Goffman’s

sociology, rather Pink enlists an impressive cast of theorists from Michel de Certeau

(1984) to geographer Doreen Massey (2005) and anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011). The

important point that Pink makes is that investigating everyday life is not the province or

the exclusive property of any single discipline. What they all share is an eye for the

seemingly unimportant while showing the value of taking the mundane aspects of life

seriously. Kathleen Stewart puts it beautifully in her book Ordinary Affects , ‘The ordinary

is something that has to be imagined and inhabited’ (Stewart, 2007: 127).

**Christmas in Croydon**

Alex Hopkinson has worked as a bus driver in south London for 10 years. I visited him

early in 2014 to talk about his father Derek’s Christmas lights. The Hopkinson’s family

home on the corner of Homestead Way, New Addington is fabled for its electric technicolor

decorations – each December from the 1980s the house was lit up like a giant

beacon of festivity (see Figure 1).

Derek Hopkinson grew up in Hoxton, East London and as a boy worked in the East

London markets. Derek picked up the patter and brogue associated with that world. Alex,

now in his thirties, explained, ‘My father was a real showman … Everyone that met him

loved i’m … he was like a magnet … he never turned anyone away.’ The family moved

to New Addington in 1984, where they have made a life on the southern fringe of London

on one of the biggest council estates in Britain.

In 1997, the London Weekend Tonight TV show ran a festive competition for the best

decorated London home. It was the second time they had run the competition and a neighbour nominated the Hopkinsons. They won and when the film crew visited with the

good news and Derek was asked why he did it he told the reporter, ‘It’s just pleasure, just

pleasure.’ The prize included a trip to Lapland but here was a small hitch, as Alex

explained, ‘the conditions were it was Mum and Dad and two kids under the age of 16. I

was already at college and my brother is six years older than me. So of course my Dad

done his charm and rang them up and said “Oh we can’t afford to do it can you still let

everyone go” and they said “yeah”. That was one of the first times we had been on a

plane, ski mobiles, skiing reindeer rides – it was great fun.’

I asked Alex whether he thought there was something unique about working-class

men of his Dad’s generation. ‘There is yeah…’ Alex replied. The larger than life local

characters had a love of life. ‘Oh yeah, enjoying themselves. It’s all lost now people are

too busy now, doing their own stuff now – not caring about no-one else.’

The way people celebrate Christmas conjures, what Jennifer Mason and Stuart Muir

call, a ‘social atmosphere’. Even the style of gift giving can be imbued with, and shaped

by, subtle classed associations (see Mason and Muir, 2014: 622). The festive glow of the

decorated working-class homes also reveals the changing relationship between class,

culture and the politics of housing. As Tim Edensor and Steve Millington in their study

of Manchester and Sheffield have shown, festive excess in matters of decoration mark

out working-class homes for class-hatred but also have a convivial quality (Edensor and

Millington, 2009). What I want to foreground is how these seasonal rituals reveal what

is at stake in everyday life. Also, I want to show how they illuminated, if you will forgive the pun, contemporary class distinctions and histories of class experience. Alex hints at

this when he reflects on his father’s life and his annual gift of seasonal generosity.

New Addington is home to 20,000 residents, many of them from working-class families

that were allocated a council property here on the edge of London as part of a process

of post-war urban renewal. Seven miles from central Croydon it has always felt to its

residents like a bit of a remote place. Early residents referred to it as ‘Little Siberia’ signaling

that sense of cold isolation. John Grindrod documents how building estates like

‘Addo’ – as it is known affectionately to its people – was part of a noble scheme of post

war reconstruction that aimed to offer working people a healthier and better environment

to live in (see Grindrod, 2013: 432–433). The utopian vision of the architects of these

new communities could not be farther from the contemporary association of places like

New Addington whose residents are derided uniformly from outside as tasteless ‘Chavs’

(see Lawler, 2005; Le Grand, 2010; Tyler, 2008). Imogen Tyler names these contemporary

forms of class hatred appropriately as a type of social abjection (Tyler, 2013).

The history of the estate starts on 15 July 1934 when the Mayor of Croydon cut the

turf for the new development. The First National Housing Trust purchased 569 acres at

Fisher’s Farm with the intention of building a ‘green village’. The Trust was a subsidiary

of Henry Boot & Sons, one of the largest building companies of the inter-war years, and

built 8000 low-income houses in the six years following the Housing (Financial

Provisions) Act 1933. The driving force was Charles Boot who was a proponent of the

market ethos of private enterprise in his housings trust as compared with bureaucratic

local authorities. In the same year that the turf was cut in Addington, Charles Boot commenced

building what would become Pinewood Film Studios.

Addington then is an entirely fabricated physical and social landscape. In many

respects it is an exemplar of the process of place-making (Pink, 2012), or what geographer

Tim Cresswell would call an ‘intersection’ or a convergence of desires, moralities

and structures physically set in concrete. He writes, ‘To think of place as an intersection

– a particular configurations of happenings – is to think of place in a constant sense of

becoming through practice and practical knowledge’ (Cresswell, 2003: 26). This was

particularly true of the making of New Addington.

*Everyday Life in ‘Little Siberia’*

At the beginning the vision for Addington was to build 4400 affordable rented homes

with open spaces, shops, two churches and a cinema. In September 1938, Charles Boot

described his vision for the estate in the first edition of a residents magazine. He saw

himself as building not just a new physical landscape but also a social one, fostering a

spirit of progress. We can glimpse his communitarian morality in the following passage

addressed as an invitation to the residents of Addington:

Thus an assemblage of bricks and mortar can become a mighty spiritual thing, a new power in

the land, a factor which will enable you to achieve an enrichment of life which will bring

happiness and pleasure… get together in sympathy, understanding, and goodwill, and you will

achieve much, in particular guide your young people to participation in the best things in life,

and you will all become better men and women, an example and incentive to the ever widening

circle of community. (Boot, 1938: 1)

Like his garden city contemporaries Boot felt he was building a new social world in

these new developments. By 1939 a quarter of the intended homes had been built numbering

1023 homes and 23 shops. By then the local population was 2000 with 642 homes

occupied and eight shops trading. Rents were 16 shillings and 9 pence a week but The

First National Housing Trust (FNHT) levied tuppence a week to support initiatives to

foster community spirit. The suggestion was met with hostility and some residents

refused to pay. However, following a visit from the Trusts’ austere Miss Rose the rebellion

was quickly squashed. She told the new residents of Addington that all those who

refused to pay would be given notice to leave and the ‘community spirit levy’ was duly

paid. Charles Boot died in 1945 but he is immortalised by local residents who still refer

to the houses he built in the thirties as the ‘Boot’s Estate’.

Boot’s vision of a model ‘Garden Village’ was sacrificed under the pressure of postwar

reconstruction and the local authority’s need to clear its bomb damaged slums. At the

end of the war 55,000 people were on the waiting list for council housing in Croydon.

Also, the 1944 Greater London Development Plan created a ‘green belt’ around London

and Addington butted right up against the protected zone limiting its capacity to grow.

The ATOM tenant’s magazine announced in September 1948 that Croydon Corporation

planned to increase the population of the estate from 5000 to 15,000. The new development

began in 1949 and included a range of building subcontrators including J. Laing &

Son, S.A. Gregory, Wates, Bunting Construction, R. Mansells, and Grace and March

which gave the impression of an unplanned scramble to build. In this phase of the estates

life some 632 houses, 80 maisonettes, six shops and 320 temporary prefabricated homes

(so-called prefabs) were built. The residents were grateful to have a roof over their heads.

One of the prefabs residents commented, ‘We thought we had found heaven when we

were handed the keys.’

The ATOM tenants magazine, which by 1949 had been established for more than a

decade, provides a fascinating account of the estate’s development through these early

peacetime years. During the course of that year the ATOM included a profile each month

of a resident. The series was entitled ‘Addington Who’s Who’ and taken together provides

10 sociological portraits of this emerging working-class community preserved in

miniature. They show the collective elements of a classed sensibility rather than an

imposed doctrine of communal respectability. These biographies give both a sense of

where the early residents of the estate came from but also a window into their everyday

lives and tastes. Most were Londoners displaced by poor housing or German bombs from

Acton, Bow, Deptford or Bermondsey in search of a new and better life in the country.

Then there were people from further afield including the North East’s Jarrow and Hetton

and miners from South Wales who had headed south to London during the depression of

the 1930s. There is also a strong trace of a connection with the Labour and co-operative

movement amongst early pioneers of ‘Little Siberia’.

Each profile in the ‘Addington Who’s Who’ included a drawn portrait by resident Bill

Low, who did an apprenticeship in the print industry and worked as a typographer (see

Figure 2). The profiles described the backgrounds of the residents but also their passions,

pet hates and everyday tastes. The first one to appear in the series was of Arthur Jones,

described as ‘a real East End cockney’ born in Poplar. He worked in shipbuilding and

was strongly connected with the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, Machinists, Smiths,

Millrights and Patternmakers (ASE). He told the ATOM interviewer proudly that he was one of only ‘90 employees to come out on strike during the national strike of 1922’.

Arthur served on Stepney Borough Council for 30 years and moved to Addington in

1940. His favourite food was described as ‘home bred rabbit, new spuds and green peas’.

His favourite drink ‘Tea, a second cup and yet another cup’ (ATOM , 1949a: 6).

Mrs M.A. Neale, born in Woodford, Essex in 1882, had a similar kind of class background.

She told the ATOM that as a young women she worked as a laundry worker

spending many hours at an ironing board and that she ‘sees red when people sigh for the

“good old days”’. Living in south London she became involved in the Labour and cooperative

movement, ‘being a staunch supporter of the Labour Party and is well remembered for her very active work in its cause at Deptford, from whence she and the

family were blasted to Addington by a German landmine’ (ATOM , 1949b: 6). She entertained

her Addington neighbours with renditions of old Music Hall songs and her favourite

book was listed as The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists . The article listed her

favourite food as a ‘steak and kidney pie’ and her beverage of choice was the ubiquitous

cup of ‘tea but partial to a Guinness when funds allow’.

What is conveyed in these portraits is a particular quality of social experience, or what

Raymond Williams (1977) referred to as ‘a structure of feeling’. This tacit but socially

alive pattern of culture is, as he puts it, ‘in solution’ without being ‘mere flux’ (Williams,

1977: 133–134). What we see in the ATOM portraits is the interplay between what

Williams would call ‘residual elements’ (Musical Halls, memories of domestic service,

dockland life) formed during the inter-war years but remaining culturally alive and

‘emergent’ new forms of working-class experience in Addington.

The ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ sections in the ‘Addington Who’s Who’ profiles are most

revealing in relation to the emergent structure of class feeling. People who were disliked

were ‘unfair critics who criticise but are slow in coming forward’ or ‘moan about this and

that being done, yet do nothing themselves’. Others who were disliked included ‘snobs

– particularly intellectual ones’ and ‘gossipers’ and ‘those who present to be what they

are not’. By contrast, people that were liked were those who ‘freely give their service for

the benefit of others’ those with ‘a sense of humour’ and ‘those who don’t put on airs’.

These sentiments betray an emergent class-inflected communalism and a deep longstanding

antipathy to middle-class pretention and snobbery.

The reference to their penchant for the ‘inevitable cup of tea’ or a weakness for an

occasional gin and orange or Guinness animates the tacit structure of class feeling of the

Addington pioneers. Equally, their aversion to ‘writing letters’ or ‘intellectual snobbery’

is also pregnant with class sentiment that distances itself from middle-class affectations.

As Beverley Skeggs points out, working-class sentiment and culture in a context like this

is defined by a different ‘system of values’ (Skeggs, 2004: 136).

A sense of social progress, gratitude and local pride is very much alive in these

accounts, even as ATOM editor Jos A. Course summarised the realities of austere times

in 1949,

After the war, Croydon Corporation purchased all building land in this area and proceeded to

erect pre-fabs and are now going on to the larger part of their housing scheme and will soon be

erecting houses for Croydon’s homeless. We extend a hearty welcome to all who come to live

in ‘Little Siberia’ and offer them whatever facilities we have in our C.A. [Community

Association]. (Course, 1949: 1)

Charles Boots’ vision of a ‘model village’ on the fringe of London would not survive

post-war housing pressure, even though its class-based structures of feeling did endure

despite the divisions that would emerge within this community.

*‘One of Britain’s Largest Council Estates’*

By 1955 there were still 4000 families in Croydon on the waiting list for council housing,

with my own amongst them. Croydon Borough council decided that it would extend Addington by building four types of housing including terraced houses, 23 storey flats and

ground floor maisonettes across 90 acres. The post-war pre-fabs, 320 of them, were torn

down and replaced with 746 new homes and an industrial estate was built where 2000

people worked largely in the metal and chemical industries. This expansion was completed

in 1963 but this didn’t satisfy housing needs. Croydon Council decided to solve the

problem at a single stroke and commissioned a single contractor, John Laing, to build

1412 houses for 12,000 people on 87 acres adjacent to Lodge Lane called Fieldway.

Fieldway was completed by 1968 but the amenities for the new residents were poor

and the quality of housing was much lower. Many complained that the flats were like

‘rabbit hutches’ prone to leaks and damp. The ‘new estate’, as it came to be known, suffered

from being built fast and on the cheap. In 1972, Jamie Reid, a local artist and political

activist, featured a whole issue on New Addington in his magazine called The

Suburban Press . Reid would go on famously to design the artwork for the Sex Pistols

and he trialed his situationist inspired artwork in the Suburban Press which sold for just

8 pence. The magazine offered a grim portrayal of isolation, poor amenities and class

stigma. The Suburban Press characterised Addington as ‘one of Britain’s largest council

estates’ and a ‘dumping ground for Croydon’s working-class’. A woman who left the

estate after suffering a nervous breakdown told the Suburban Press , ‘There was no where

to go and nothing to do. The milk was stolen off your doorstep and the washing off your

line’ (Suburban Press , 1972: 8). Estates like New Addington promised social improvement

but by the late 1970s they felt more and more like places of confinement for working-

class residents. This was particularly acute for women who were cut off from

female-centred extended networks and where social isolations combined with increased

incidents of domestic violence that became a hidden but open secret (see Lebeau, 1997).

Going off the estate meant having to face middle-class disapproval. Another young

woman commented, ‘there were three of us from New Addington at a girls grammar

school in Croydon. We were looked upon as being inferior’.1

By the beginning of the 1980s, New Addington’s physical shape was complete. By

this point, as Lynsey Hanley comments, the phrase ‘council estate’ for those who lived in

them became a kind of ‘psycho-social bruise’ (Hanley, 2012: ix). The sense of alienation

and class stigma certainly endured but so too did a shared pattern of class feeling. This

forms the historical backdrop for the argument I want to develop here and why social

divisions and distinctions can be understood through paying attention to something as

seemingly trivial as Christmas decorations.

**Fairy Tale of New Addington**

After a few years of living in New Addington the Hopkinsons started (during the mid-

1980s) to decorate the outside of their home at Christmas. Alex Hopkinson tells me it

was his father Derek’s idea: ‘My mum’s birthday is the 3rd December. As a single parent

in the 1960’s my nan always tried to make sure that mum had as much as the other children

and worked every hour to make sure this happened … this included Xmas decorations

up by her birthday. Dad just carried this tradition on but in an even bigger way!!’

‘Festive excess’ is not material indulgence but a compensation for hardship and scarcity

in what Goffman would call the ‘backstage’.

The Hopkinsons were not the only family to celebrate Christmas in this way. By the

1990s there were numerous homes on the estate decorated in lavish colour, with glowing

snowmen and Father Christmases shining out of the pitch darkness at night. Sukhdev

Sandhu writes that houses that stick out from timid suburban conformity appear both

‘heroic and lonely’ (Sandhu, 2007: 22). Christmas kitsch in ‘Addo’ has that kind of exceptional

boldness. Driving around on Christmas night in 2013 there were fewer illuminated

houses than in previous Decembers. Austerity is biting like the cold North Downs’ wind.

When I left home over 30 years ago almost no-one outside Croydon had heard of New

Addington. Then in November 2011, Addington resident Emma West shouted racist

abuse on a tram bound for Addington. Her rant was filmed on a mobile phone (see

Gilroy, 2012). The video went viral, watched by over 11 million people on YouTube.

Championed by the BNP and the English Defense League, West became a political

symbol.

It transpired that she had been suffering with mental health problems and had taken

100 mg of the antidepressant Citalopram, more than twice the recommended limit.

According to her barrister, David Martin-Sperry, Emma West was ‘deeply depressed’ by

the far right’s support, and under pressure from the trial she attempted to take her own

life on three occasions. In July 2013, West was bound over and sentenced to a 24-month

community order. The anti-fascist magazine Searchlight concluded that the Crown

Prosecution Service had exacerbated the situation by failing to take West’s mental health

into account (Gable, 2013).

In the summer of 2012, New Addington was again in the headlines following the

murder of 12-year-old Tia Sharp by her grandmother’s boyfriend. The Daily Mail

described Tia as a ‘victim of the moral decay that now prevails in parts of Britain. The

names may change, they may come from different parts of the country, but all are casualties

of the same underclass whose “values” – subsidised in the most part by benefits – are

being passed down from generation to generation’ (Bracchi and Kelly, 2013: 1). In the

media, New Addington became a tag for the work-shy underclass, benefit scroungers and

cultureless ‘Chavs’. In November 2013, The Croydon Advertiser published ‘well being

scores’ for the borough and the New Addington and Fieldway estates came bottom: the

worst places to live in Croydon (Davies, 2013).

The estate was a place of improvement for many working people offering them a first

real stable home, an escape from slum clearance and post-war austerity. During the

1970s, home ownership was very low, confined mainly to the oldest part of the estate

built in the thirties and named after Charles Boot. Margaret Thatcher changed this and

the level of home ownership during the eighties increased rapidly, as residents took up

the ‘right to buy’ their homes. Families like my own and the Hopkinsons bought their

council homes. Since the Conservative government’s right-to-buy policy started in 1981,

3500 council homes have been sold off into private ownerships.

The estate is much more socially variegated than outsiders would have it. Home ownership

on the estate is 38 per cent in Fieldway, known locally as the ‘New Estate’, and 55

per cent for the older ‘red brick houses’ in New Addington ward. This is relatively low

when compared with 69 per cent for Croydon as a whole (Strategic Partnership, 2009a,

2009b). The homes decorated extravagantly at Christmas are often, although not exclusively

the red-brick ones. The festive illumination of these homes does not simply reflect their economic status or spending power, rather the Christmas lights are a seasonal gift

to the estate as a whole.

Derek Hopkinson died in St Christopher’s Hospice, Sydenham in 2004. Alex put up

the Christmas lights that year and decided ‘to leave it at that’. They sold some of the

‘blow mould’ decorations that Derek had imported at considerable expense from the

United States. In 2013, Alex wanted to rekindle the tradition in his Dad’s memory to

mark the 10th anniversary of his passing.

I asked Alex what it takes to put on a show like this, ‘It’s tiring but worth it for the

people’s faces. We started back in October’. The roof was first thing to tackle with the

help of a couple of mates. Alex continued, ‘When we started doing it people came up to

us and said “oh we remember when we brought our kids around”.’ It is telling of a gendered

domestic division of labour that it is the men who take charge of the public surfaces

of the home.

On Sunday 1 December 2013, the Hopkinson’s Christmas lights were ‘turned on’ and

it was a truly extraordinary spectacle full of excitement and festive anticipation. A picture

of Derek Hopkinson was mounted on the front of the house decorated by 10,000

lights, luminous reindeer, choirboys and of course Father Christmas himself. 400 people

assembled in front of the house in expectation, news had spread through word of mouth

and Facebook. A local grandmother asked via Facebook if her granddaughter Ellie could

switch them on. When Ellie flicked the switch at 7 p.m. the Hopkinsons treated their

neighbours to a firework show launched from their back garden. One of Alex’s friends

played Father Christmas and handed out 170 bags of sweets to children over the course

of nearly two hours. They served teas and coffees from an urn in front of the house raising

over £500 for charity on the night. Kids and parents from all over the estate came to

witness the gloaming spectacle on a cold night.

I asked him if people think he is mad to invest so much: ‘It was something I thought

he [Derek] would have wanted. Dad liked it so much, it was sort of like part of him. Next

year it won’t cost me half the amount.’ It has cost him £1,500 so far, not an inconsiderable

amount for a man supporting a family on a bus driver’s salary. Then there will be the

extra £150 on top of their winter electricity bill. ‘I done it for the local people’, explains

Alex. He carries more of his father in him than he realises. The spectacular technicolour

show in many respects is both a symbol of his father Derek’s absence but also a trace of

his phantom presence that shapes his son’s actions.

‘It has been a tough time’, I say to Alex. ‘Yes, Tia Sharp and the riots [of 2011] I think

it just needed another cause to start to enjoy themselves again. That’s why I put up the

Wishing Tree.’ In front of the house is a tree with tags and a Sharpie pen. It is smothered

with scribbled messages to lost loved ones and messages to Father Christmas from kids.

Hard times have hit, unemployment is rising and local house prices are soaring.

People can no longer afford to buy their council homes. In 2012, Croydon Council

received 119 expressions of interest in ‘right to buy’ but the initiative resulted in just two

sales (Bury, 2012). Elderly residents, many of whom are widowed, are being forced to

remortgage their homes to private companies in order to avoid sliding into poverty.

‘Right to buy’ brought affordable council housing to an end and the risk now for lowincome

families is a return to the impoverishment of pre-war slums (Meek, 2015; see

also Dorling, 2014).

‘You can do a class analysis of London with Christmas lights’, writes China Miéville

astutely. In December, class distinction can be discerned through peering through the

window of most London homes. In poorer homes ‘the season is celebrated with chromatic

surplus’; while the rich and middle-class ‘strive to distinguish themselves with

White-lit Christmas trees’ (Miéville, 2012: 29–30).

Driving to New Addington seems to support Miéville’s thesis. In affluent Beckenham,

homes are bathed in subtle white light sometimes with a luminous electric stag grazing

on the lawn (see Figure 3). ‘Ah good taste, as Picasso may or may not have said, what a

dreadful thing’, writes Miéville. I am sure he would approve of New Addington, where

entire houses are illuminated with multi-coloured electric excess.

I put this to Alex and ask him if there is a relationship between social class and

Christmas decorations. He nods knowingly, ‘I think it’s people who have never had

nothin’ who like to give back to people. You always find people who are poor always

give and people that are rich don’t … and that’s the reason they stay rich for.’ We laugh

as he continues, ‘When you think about it a lot of the rich people they sort of don’t give

to people and that is the reason why they’ve got money.’ ‘Is that why they’ve got their

classy white lights?’, I ask. ‘Exactly’ he concludes. Working-class sentiment steadfastly

refuses the ‘authority of judgments’ that have their origin in middle-class respectability

(see Skeggs, 2005: 976: see also Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

The money raised from the collection box in front of their house will be donated to St

Christopher’s Hospice. ‘Up here obviously a lot of people go there either with cancer or other illness. They were fantastic and allowed my mum to sleep in the next bed during

his last few days so that they could be together. The money we raise will be given to them

to help enable their work to go on’, says Alex.

At the heart of this story is an ordinary miracle. In contrast to the glitzy consumerism

of the supermarkets and shopping centres that profit from Christmas, this is a spectacle

of community – a gift given for free in hard times by a family to the estate. It is close to

what Tom Hall and Robin Smith refer to as a practical kindness and everyday street

repair (Hall and Smith, 2015). You can see it reflected in the faces of the children as they

laugh excitedly and come to admire the glowing colours of the Christmas lights. There is

no better tribute to Derek’s memory, one of New Addington’s best-loved characters.

As a child Kirsty MacColl lived close to New Addington. In her famous collaboration

with the Pogues, Fairy Tale of New York – the greatest Christmas song of all time – she

sings with Shane MacGowan, of bells ringing out for Christmas Day. Somehow the

Hopkinsons’ festive decorations are reminiscent of that stirring refrain. What we can see

here is an enduring structure of feeling and care. It was evident from the very beginnings

of the estate in the portraits I described earlier. It is all the more significant given the dire

state of public housing, where a whole generation of young working-class people have

little hope of the opportunities their parents enjoyed.

A young mother took her kids up to see the Hopkinsons’ Christmas lights. Her story

is emblematic of the new situation. She was evicted from her council flat earlier in 2013

for not paying her rent, but it was not just that times were hard financially. Eviction was

her way out of the abusive relationship she was in where she had repeatedly been the

victim of domestic violence. The council simply viewed her as a bad debtor and issued

an eviction notice. A local housing office told me, ‘There’s not a lot of sympathy out

there … if you get evicted then the legislation says you are intentionally homeless.

People don’t come back.’

This is how new class divisions work through distinguishing between the ‘deserving’

and ‘undeserving’ poor. She now lives with her Nan who, like the Hopkinsons, bought

her council house in the 1980s. The atmosphere of class cruelty and widening housing

inequalities creates new forms of family, where – as in this case – the old are in need of

everyday care and at the same time provide a roof for the young in need of a home.

**Conclusion**

There is nothing better for a sociologist full of the righteous desire to say something

worth listening to than to be the bearer of bad news. It gives us a sense of purpose and a

public mission. Tales of social damage, hopelessness and injustice always make for a

good sociological story. But the cost is we too often look past or don’t listen to moments

of the repair and hope in which a livable life is made possible. This is why an attention

to everyday life matters because it offers the possibility to admit such ordinary virtues to

serious attention.

I am not suggesting for a minute that injustices, inequalities and exclusions are not also

alive in the everyday and I have tried to illustrate them here. Rather, I am suggesting people

refused to be crushed by those destructive forces. In the glow of the Hopkinsons’ Christmas illuminations is a hope that is cast against the darkness of a society where class divisions are

deepening and where a generation is being cheated of the prospect of an affordable home.

There is much more at play here than what is referred to in contemporary theoretical

jargon as ‘class making practice’. Moreover, the priority given to ‘practice’ and ‘performativity’

in class analysis result, perhaps unintentionally, in de-historicising accounts of

working-class experience and flattening their structures of feeling. It is paradoxical that this

syndrome should pervade so much contemporary scholarship on class because it is often

inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu who was an ethnographer concerned deeply with

the historical cast of embodied life. And yet it seems the dominance of Pierre Bourdieu’s

theoretical legacy has led to a sociology of class without feeling. The trouble with relying on

online surveys (Savage et al., 2013) or even mass observation accounts (Savage, 2010) is

that they inevitably produce thin descriptions of vital and complex forms of class experience

that are unfolding in everyday life. A Goffmanesque attentiveness returns us to the issue of

how class is lived as a complex structure of feeling with networks of interaction as well as

structural dimensions (see Prior, 2013 and also Bottero and Crossley, 2011). Erving

Goffman’s brilliant ear and eye for the seemingly unimportant provides a resource for developing

an understanding of the often unspoken realities of social class. This quality is also

evident in some of the best accounts of class experience in cultural studies.

Also, contemporary discussions of the formations of class suffer from a kind of presentism

that skims the surface of class culture without accounting adequately for either the residues

of history in it or its place-based qualities. Richard Hoggart’s classic The Uses of

Literacy is packed with such sensuous fragments like the qualities of working class food and

the post-war penchant for tinned salmon that was far tastier than fresh salmon (Hoggart,

1957: 27). Equally, Beverley Skeggs conveys the confining power of class-inflected ideas

about respectability when she described how working-class women would apologise for the

untidiness of their front room even when it was spotlessly clean and immaculate (Skeggs,

1997: 90). We need to reconnect with the example of writers like Hoggart and Skeggs and

their capacity to animate class experience in a vivid description of a small everyday detail.

It is encouraging that a number of new ethnographies of working-class life are emerging that

has exactly this kind of quality (see McKenzie, 2015; Paton, 2014). It is a welcome development

and a sign of the direction that contemporary class analysis needs to take.

Through the example of looking at Christmas in New Addington I showed how these

sentiments were formed but also how residual elements – like the pioneers portrayed in

the ATOM – are carried through time. The sparkle of those decorations cast a light on

class distinctions. Bottero warns rightly though that we need to exercise caution when

reading implicit processes as evidence of class structure (Bottero, 2004). We might put

this another way and ask: are there no white Christmas lights in Addington?

Pete and I were at school together and we’ve known each other for almost 50 years. He

works as a bus driver and lives now on the Boots’ estate in Addington. ‘I laughed my head

off when I heard that’, he said when I visited him on Christmas Eve, referring to the argument

I was having with my family over the colour of our Christmas lights. Not wanting to

concede too easily, I asked to see the colour of his Christmas tree in his front room. After a

minor struggle, he revealed a synthetic tree decorated in tastefully pure white light. ‘Here I

am’, said Pete, laughing at the wonderful absurdity of the conversation, ‘desperately trying

to be middle-class and there you are with all your education desperately trying not to be middle-class – funny old world.’ Funny indeed. Pete had plenty of ‘chromatic surplus’ in

the Christmas decorations in the rest of Pete’s house, so it is not quite that the pattern

doesn’t hold. I include this story here as a cautionary tale about the risk we run in suppressing

complexities in our attempts to understand the way class structures our lives.

As Ken Plummer observed at the very beginning of this discussion, everyday life is

precisely the place where this complexity unfolds, and therefore why studying it is

important. This requires, I would argue, an ethnographic sensibility and an ongoing

engagement with lives unfolding in real time and through time. The problem we also

have as a discipline is that the way we write about everyday life can seem absurdly inaccessible

to the very people who inhabit it. Rather, we need to find ways to write about

everyday life that are open, recognisable and legible to those who live it.

To end, I want to summarise the key arguments for why studying everyday life matters.

The first of these is to identify the public issues that are alive in the mundane aspects

of everyday life. At its best this can produce a re-enchantment of the ordinary that is

transformative for both those people inside specific social worlds and also those of us

who might merely remain curious onlookers. Second, the everyday matters because it

offers the opportunity to link the smallest story to the largest social transformation.

Developing a sociological attentiveness affords such a potential because of its capacity

to imaginatively find a big story in the most trifling ordinary detail.

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**Note**

1. Grammar schools had entrance exams called the 11 plus. They were the bastions of middleclass

respectability that allowed limited number of bright working-class kids the promise of

opportunity and respectability.

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