Introduction to the GBCS and Elites: Stratification or exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation?

Beverley Skeggs (2015) pre-publication

Published in The Sociological Review, Vol. 63, 205–222 (2015) DOI: 10.1111/1467-954X.12297

C \_ 2015

**Abstract**

This general introduction locates the GBCS papers on the elite, and their respondents, within a context. It emphasizes some of the key points made by the respondents in order to intervene in a discussion about what is at stake in doing sociological research on class. It draws attention to the differences between on the one hand status and stratification, and on the other class struggle perspectives, and hence the difference between a hierarchical gradational analysis and a relational one based on the struggle between groups over value. I begin to answer a question raised by many of the respondents in this special issue: “what is the question that the analysis of class is designed to answer?” I also draw attention to some of the problems with Bourdieu’s “structuring architecture”, showing how the partial reproduction of Bourdieu presents fundamental problems, leading to a Great British Stratification Survey (“GBSS”) rather than a GBCS. The different trajectories in class analysis that confusingly merge over the concept of culture in the present are briefly mapped, showing very different intentions in analysis. I argue that to understand class we need to understand the processes of classification: exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation, and their legitimation. Overall this special issue extends the sociological debate on class into a larger political frame about injustice, classification and value. It develops arguments from anthropology that maintain that it is the ability to define what value *is* (through culture) that is the ultimate difference in politics and power.

Keywords: GBCS, Bourdieu, stratification, exploitation, domination, dispossession, devaluation, power

**Introduction**

This special issue has been a long time coming. It was quite a difficult process to find sociologists who were willing to spend time mounting an academic critique of the GBCS. Many had taken to social media and email to make sharp and quick comments but few were willing to dedicate their precious research time to it. Fortunately some of those already working on class in different empirical ways, nationally and internationally, were able to respond. The sociologists who developed and defended the NS-SEC were eager to comment, and have engaged in critique from the start. Having felt previously excluded from the main sites of UK sociological debate (journals) Marxists were more reluctant. (The Marxist debate being often internecine and incredibly technical in their own specialist journals or websites (eg http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/)).

Many feminists, including myself, had fought doggedly to keep the issue of class on the wider British political social science agenda via cultural studies and education throughout the 1980s and 90s ([Arnot 1979](#_ENREF_2), [Griffin 1985](#_ENREF_39), [Walkerdine and Lucey 1989](#_ENREF_64), [Skeggs 1997](#_ENREF_58), [Reay 1998](#_ENREF_50)), but have now moved into different areas of research. They had lived through a period when most sociologists were either very traditional stratification theorists or had taken a post-modern turn, considering the category of class to be redundant. Few feminists were cited in the supposed ‘new’ cultural class analysis’, although some were initially present in the reframing of the debate ([Savage 2003](#_ENREF_54)). They were pleased that the category of class was on a national agenda but were ambivalent about exactly how this had been achieved.

It should, however, be noted that the leaders of the GBCS had been working on class from a traditional sociological perspective for some time, e.g. Fiona Devine ([1992](#_ENREF_30), [1997](#_ENREF_31)) on the Affluent Worker Study, and Mike Savage, on the middle classes in the 1990s ([Savage, Barlow et al. 1992](#_ENREF_55)). Savage worked through a cultural lens later ([Savage 2000](#_ENREF_53)), although still in debate with traditional stratification (Goldthorpe) analysis. Gender, race, sexuality and feminist and anti-racist theory rarely entered their analysis, other than through the heroic attempts by Rosemary Crompton to ‘add in’ gender to the traditional stratifications of occupation and households ([Crompton and Mann 1987](#_ENREF_27), [Crompton 1993](#_ENREF_25)).

Many international class scholars thought the analysis of the GBCS to be too specifically national, and whilst class can be considered to be a peculiarly British preoccupation, it is only the success of ideologies of meritocracy (eg in the US via “the American Dream”) or the promise of social democracy, that have enabled other national spaces to demote its significance. France, Brazil and China, represented in this special issue, all offer spaces, like the UK, where the term class is an identifier of inequality.

However, the key critique of the GBCS was provided by those who were studying issues of knowledge production, to explore what is at stake conceptually in mainstream sociology. Therefore, the debates that follow are about what matters to sociology, which questions we ask, what counts as sociology and how we engage with public sociology of a very specific kind in a very specific context.

Fortunately it is now much harder, even downright embarrassing, to claim class to be redundant ([Giddens 1991](#_ENREF_34)) or to claim it to be a “zombie category”([Beck 1992](#_ENREF_4)). The ideological politics of austerity have made class divisions and their consequences even more apparent. For instance, in the last few years there have been £18billion cuts to the welfare budget, leading to the establishment of 423 food banks in Britain which feed 913,138 people including 330,205 children. How can the existence of class be denied when the real incomes for the poorest have fallen 40%, and 33% of families lack basic resources, and where the longest depression of wages since 1979 has occurred and the cost of living has risen by 25% in last 5 years and where the top 10% of households in the UK are now 850 times wealthier than the bottom 10%. This is in the seventh richest country in the world where the rich are getting richer, and where the top rate of income tax has been halved (it was 83% in 1979) for the richest. Britain’s richest increased their wealth by £69billion in 2014 alone. [[1]](#endnote-1) It now seems an opportune time to return to the issue of class and the GBCS did exactly that. But how it did it is what is at stake in this special issue.

One of the key issues taken up by the respondents to this special issue, is how public and private corporations – the BBC- and an advertising/marketing company (GfK) generated the data that shaped what we were offered as sociological analysis. What methodological difference, does the BBC ‘class calculator’ interactive web survey (used to declare one’s education, cultural tastes, money and social connections) produce when compared to the classification of occupational categorizations through national statistical archives? Or to the data produced about the lived experience of class generated through longitudinal ethnographies? The methods of knowledge production are radically different and become apparent in the analysis presented.

This special issue began in May 2013 as a response to the GBCS, but then when all the abstracts were later submitted from the GBCS team, they all had elites as their central focus. As some lined-up respondents were most incensed about the category of the precariat generated through the GBCS this also meant a radical rejiggle was required. Other respondents were geared up to respond to the initial paper by Savage et al. ([Savage, Devine et al. 2013](#_ENREF_56)) and the public response to it. And as this was what they were initially asked to do, when the focus changed to elites, I thought it was still worth keeping the more general responses for they are powerful sociological contributions.

The international respondents were specifically recruited to illuminate the national specificities of class analysis, also chose to focus on the general theoretical frames of the GBCS. The idea for keeping all these papers together is to show how different elements of class analysis can take shape, through different geographical places, to methodological considerations, and intense theoretical interrogation. So the structure of this special issue is organized with the key papers from the GBCS team on the elite at the beginning, with an introduction by Mike Savage, followed by a paper by Fiona Devine and Helene Snee that describes the process developed with the BBC and public reception to the GBCS experiment. Detailed papers follow on social mobility into the elite, the stratification of higher education in the UK, and the metropolitan geographies and differences in political engagement.

Following the GBCS papers is a methodological critique section. This begins with a comparison of the GBCS to previous research undertaken on class and culture by the CCSE (Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project) that Elizabeth Silva worked on prior to the GBCS with Mike Savage. The CCSE began as an attempt to replicate Bourdieu’s ([1986](#_ENREF_6)) French *Distinctions* analysis of how taste makes and marks class difference, a framework also used in the GBCS. Like many other critics Silva challenges Savage et al’s (2013) claims that the GBCS is ‘new’. She also queries the reliability of the GBCS by examining the difference between the types of data used, questioning the politics of citation and drawing attention to the haphazard nature of the BBC class calculator. In an era of neo-liberal audit of research in the UK (eg the Research Excellence Framework productivity exercise), where ‘impact’ can have a substantial effect on future research funding and careers, the public impact of the GBCS can be seen as a performative device, one that both impacted upon public understandings of class and set the agenda for the production of sociological knowledge. Even this special issue counts towards the GBCS’s public impact. Silva’s paper responds specifically to the paper by Devine and Snee and the introduction from Savage.

Further methodological challenges come in strongly from Colin Mills, who has been a powerful critic of the methods used, see his blog at <http://oxfordsociology.blogspot.co.uk/> and also the debate on BBC Radio with myself and Mike Savage on the GBCS (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01s4qqs). Mills was involved in the evaluation of the NS-SEC (developed from Goldthorpe’s classifications by David Rose, Peter Elias and Dave Pevalin ([Rose and Pevalin 2010](#_ENREF_52))), which used occupational status and is used by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). Initial statements by the GBCS team claimed to have transcended the NS-SEC. However, after sustained critique by Mills and others, the NS-SEC classifications have been used to compliment the GBCS (see Savage, Devine and Taylor and Friedman and Cunningham in this volume). Mills, along with other quantitative sociologists, acted as a reviewer of some of the first drafts of the GBCS papers and it is interesting that some of his criticisms were actually taken into account, a point to which he draws attention. Mills admires the chutzpah of swapping analysis of data sets mid-way through the process, but that doesn’t assuage his doubts. He maintains that the GBCS is based on ‘an unavoidable incoherence’ that arises from the bias in responses to the original survey, leading him to identify the GBCS with the “Scott Fitzgerald” school of stratification research. He asks the GBCS team to compare their research to that of the classic elite theories of Bottomore, Gutsman and Wright Mills. Mills points to the necessity of having robust and transparent data from which to make inferences, especially when so much is at stake.

Tim May, a stalwart of methodological critique, especially around the issue of reflexivity, responds to the GBCS by asking us to be alert to the positions, dispositions and accounts of the processes by which it was produced. Like Mills, he asks ‘what did they intend?’, ‘just who is this work for?’ and ‘what is it trying to achieve?’ A question also asked later by Tai-Lok Lui and Imogen Tyler about the academic purpose of the GBCS. May argues for epistemic vigilance over the blurring of the boundaries between everyday opinion and social scientific discourse, a blurring that was clearly evident in the design and reception to the GBCS in the media. Without this vigilance, ‘a sociology of sociology’, May maintains, we give up our claims for credibility and political responsibility.

Joanna Latimer and Rolland Munro take a different tack, questioning the definition of culture that underpins the GBCS. They maintain that rather than understanding culture as 'world making’, Savage et al. (2013) reduce culture to distinctions made through consumption, thereby reducing culture into possession and resource. They echo Harriet Bradley’s (2014) comment that the GBCS is a ‘scale of possession’, not a class analysis (p. 431). Latimer and Munro take this critique of possession further, building on debates in anthropology which propose that the ‘turn to culture’ was a turn that enabled the concerns of neo-liberalism to set the academic agenda, thereby reducing human action to consumption and property ownership ([Gregory 2009](#_ENREF_38), [Graeber 2011](#_ENREF_37)). They argue that in terms of the radical changes taking place in the world such as the incitement to audit, insinuating measurement into the minutiae of our lives, we need to be attentive to how we legitimate the agendas set by capital relations. They maintain that our current conjuncture is based on people being measured on their performances of readiness and reasonableness. In order to understand this as a sociological phenomenon, they argue, we need to take stock of changes to power, rather than just add patterns of consumption to social stratification models.

I’d also argue that if consumption becomes the measure of the person how do we understand the labour that underpins its production? Furthermore, I’ve previously shown how the ability to turn culture into a form of property is a particular prerogative in the making of middle class personhood. To become a subject of value one has to consume, display and properties culture (a legal term, see ([Radin 1993](#_ENREF_48), [Davies 2001](#_ENREF_29))). We can also ask, in more prosaic terms, not just how do people access and propertise culture but how do people learn to consume in particular ways? What Bourdieu calls the episteme of practice. As Bourdieu ([2000](#_ENREF_10)) pointed out, people inherit cultural capital (*or not*) through family practices and are shaped through access (*or not*) to education. Consumption is also dependent upon financial resources and social networks. Without understanding these histories and dependencies we lose sight of the context for any social practice and the significance of social location. It is this point that Bertoncelo explores, to which I will return shortly.

In the following section we have contributions from key sociologists of class in France, Brazil and China. Delphine Serre and Anne-Catherine Wagner examine how Bourdieu’s class analysis has been put to use to examine the transformation of value in French social space through a multi-dimensional relational analysis. They use their own ethnographic research to explore the relationships between different forms of capital, showing how difficult it is to subject cultural capital to any form of quantification. However, by breaking cultural capital into its constituent parts they reveal it to operate primarily as a mechanism of domination and legitimation between classes. They show how in France the elite have come to rely on educational qualifications to blur the boundary between the principles of economic and cultural domination, also noting that managerial cultural capital is very different from a humanist cultural capital. Serre and Wagner ask the challenging question; ‘might educational capital only be effective in staging the legitimacy of the dominant classes?’ As more and more people enter higher education and credential inflation increases they show how the educational aspect of cultural capital is still a major principle in social differentiation and domination. This article should be read closely with the one by Wakeling and Savage that points to the stratification between British Universities, with Oxford surprisingly outstripping Cambridge on many measures.

Edison Bertoncelo also concentrates on the role of culture in the making of class divisions in Brazil. He draws upon a large-scale interview survey with 2,400 individuals to map the publics of culture. Unlike the GBCS, emphasis is placed on *time* (trajectory and history) and *how* culture is consumed (socialization and accumulation). His analysis (also using the multiple correspondence analysis used by Bourdieu, CCSE and the GBCS) points to the significance of ‘immaterial inheritance’. The inheritance of dispositions of competence and confidence is seen to be of particular significance. Bertoncelo’s analysis shows how *the mode* of cultural appropriation is more significant than what is actually consumed.

Orientation *to consuming* rather than the consumption *of* an object or event may be more important for understanding the relations and reproduction of class divisions. The ‘how’ (Bourdieu’s episteme) of consumption is intimately linked to symbolic capital, for the ‘how’ is the mechanism by which certain cultures are legitimated. Unlike the GBCS Bertoncelo is able to link cultural practices to the symbolic. His analysis also demonstrates the significance of time *with* money: being able to employ a working-class domestic servant, for instance, is crucial to middle class cultural participation in Brazil. This is not just a relation of consumption but a relation of exploitation, whereby one class can use the time of the other (see Toscano and Woodcock, and Tyler in this volume too). The questions asked, the approach taken and the analysis pursued by the Brazilian study offer a nuanced analysis that should be read alongside the GBCS.

Tai-Lok Lui goes back to the original data presented by the GBCS and asks, as do Mills and May, ‘what is the question that the GBCS was trying to answer?’ For Lui class was devised as a concept to answer specific questions about the organization of social inequality. From his location in Hong Kong he points to the significance of Chinese *institutions* in maintaining class inequality, and hence the role of institutions more generally, in the making of class relations. For instance, the household registration system is absolutely central to the formation of class in China, where the urban and the rural are respectively categorized and assumptions about their value as Chinese civilians made. This is why, he argues, inductive methods based on variables of consumption (as used and promoted by the GBCS – see Devine and Snee this volume), generate arbitrary boundaries which are not reliable. This is because they do not include and cannot understand the ways that institutions categorize and institutionalize.

We also need to be alert to performativity, to the way in which the academic concepts that we use institutionalize perspectives. If somebody asks you about your class, say via a website advertising ‘what class are you?’ by answering you will have already brought into your imagination various possibilities for classification, and the value of that classification. As E.P.Thompson ([1966](#_ENREF_62)) pointed out in his study of the making of the English working class, it took a great deal of time for classifications to come into effect. It took even longer for those designated working class by the emergent middle class to recognize themselves in the terms described for and about them, primarily because classifications always come pre-loaded with presumptions and e/valuations.

This point is taken up with a vengeance by Imogen Tyler, who asks ‘what is the problem that “class” describes? Echoing loudly other respondents, Tyler asks the crucial sociological question ‘in whose interests?’ and ‘for what purpose do we need the GBCS?’ Rather than just fiddling with different forms of classification and moving people and groups up and down hierarchical scales, Tyler argues instead that we need to question ‘why classification?’ She shows how classification has been used against the working class to make them subject to the ‘biopolitics of disposability’, in which those who cannot consume are rendered as a drain on the nation. She details how classification via stratification works to legitimate exploitation and decouple class from inequality. Yet it was precisely against exploitation and inequality, Thompson would argue, through which the working class was formed. Whereas Latimer and Munro argue that culture is world making, Tyler argues it is a political economy, a cramped space by which political struggles are turned into cultural entertainment and profit for TV companies.

Alberto Toscano and Jamie Woodcock maintain that it is impossible to understand class without understanding forms of exploitation and power. They offer another challenge to attempts to reduce culture to consumption and insist (in the tradition of Stuart Hall’s version of British Cultural Studies – see more later) that culture is the site of struggle. They too, like Serres and Wagner, and Tyler, point to the significance of legitimation by symbolic capital for shaping struggles. If struggle is reduced to an understanding of hierarchical advantage to accumulate (as per GBCS), they argue, we will be analytically unable to understand how the organization of economic structures, such as neoliberalism and financialization, cause the redistribution of wealth upwards through political policies of austerity and privatization. If we just understand advantage we lose site of the historical process that brought inequality into effect and enable injustice to be legitimated. Toscano and Woodcock also stress the global nature of class struggle against exploitation and suggest that the GBCS may just be a parochial demonstration of UK market/ing models of lifestyle difference.

Before concluding this introduction I want to draw attention to two critical aspects regarding class analysis: power and value, and then discuss the different trajectories that messily merge around the concept of culture.

**Power? The Great British Stratification Survey**

For me the GBCS is really a Great British Stratification Survey. But I can see why this would not have the same media pulling power as The Great British Class Survey! Which in itself is interesting. The GBCS claims to be a relational analysis but it is more a gradational mapping of status, as Harriet Bradley ([2014](#_ENREF_16)) notes. As Weber pointed out long ago (1905) status is very different from class, although it can operate *with* class (see Latimer and Munro this issue). A clear mapping of stratification can be seen in the elite entry into higher education (Wakeling and Savage, this volume), who detail gradational internal stratification between subjects within elite institutions. Cunningham and Savage paper (this volume) also details the distinctive elite character of a minority of London’s population, each with a specific micro-geography.

For Weber, status groups are stratified ‘according to the principles of their consumption of goods’ (Weber 1978: 937), hence the GBCS does exactly that, making a it a “GBSS” rather than a GBCS. Even John Goldthorpe (founding father of the NS-SEC occupational classifications) drew the difference when interviewed by the Observer newspaper. “To put it very simply,” says Goldthorpe, “class relates to the way in which people *make their living* in the labour market, and status relates more to the way they then spend those earnings, their patterns of consumption and their lifestyle and social intimates ” (30.11.14). The issue of stratification also takes us back to the issue of what question is the “GBSS” asking?

Class and stratification have very different genealogies and both exist to answer and explain entirely different things. Social stratification analysis emerged form the political arithmetic tradition in the UK, which began in 1665 with William Petty and the desire by government to understand ‘the value of the people’. He organized the population into gradations in order to maximize the collection of tax. Eventually in the twentieth century political arithmetic morphed into class through the use of occupational classifications to explain political attitudes ([Goldthorpe 1963](#_ENREF_36)). A Marxist Class analysis emerges in a parallel track in the 1840s to understand the mechanisms of capital, labour, exploitation, inequality and conflict.

Loic Wacquant (a co-writer of Bourdieu’s) has also accused the GBCS of misinterpreting Bourdieu by generating a gradational hierarchy rather than a study of time and space. Wacquant responded within three minutes of being sent the by email the press release for the GBCS with:

Are these folk or analytic categories? The GBCS reads like a gradational grid of status, Lloyd Warner (*an anthropologist who generated status taxonomies*) reinvented with the language of capital. But Bourdieu's theory of multiple capitals is the means for constructing a multi-dimensional space (at least tri-dimensional: volume and structure of capital + *trajectory*), not a flat one-dimensional hierarchy, and then studying (not arbitrating) classification struggles as to where classes do or do not form and cohere. It's a relational construct, not a gradational one. (my emphasis)

In his response he reminds us to read the original Bourdieu papers on class (Bourdieu 1985, Bourdieu 1987), ones I would highly recommend. Although as Alex Callinicos (1999) presciently pointed out, there is a capacity in Bourdieu’s analysis for drawing attention away from class differences.

As Latimer and Munro show (this issue), it is only if people engage with forms of grading – as cultural devices to self-identify and put to use in *legitimating their symbolic power* – that status indicators map into class relations. It is only if status is used to legitimate difference through symbolic mechanisms that uphold class power that status relates to class. Hence the enthusiasm by which the middle class responded to the ‘class calculator’ (a stratification computation?) is a measure of how they made visible their person value to both themselves and others through symbolic means. Without understanding how the symbolic converts value -- through representation and classification -- we cannot connect status to class relations. They remain as independent measures of different things.

Both Weber and Bourdieu had an analysis of power and symbolic violence, of how power was maintained and legitimated through specific cultural mechanisms, such as education and religion. What is most odd, for me, as a critic and previous prolific user of Bourdieu, is how the symbolic – the key legitimating mechanism in the conversion of culture to symbolic power (in Weber too), is lost in the GBCS. If we have no mechanism for the conversion of cultural and economic capital into legitimate power how can the GBCS profess to be a

contemporary understanding of class as relational, or even as Devine and Snee propose in this volume, to be a sociology of power?

With the loss of the symbolic mechanisms for conversion into power comes the inability to understand violence and conflict that are fundamental to understanding class relations. However, Michael Burawoy ([2012](#_ENREF_18)), our North American editor, maintains that even Bourdieu’s understanding of the symbolic is not adequate for understanding power and domination, rested as it is in the tautological habitus. Burawoy notes how habitus is an intuitively appealing concept that can explain *any* behaviour, precisely because it is unknowable and unverifiable, making it into ‘a folk concept with a fancy name – a concept without content that might equally well be translated as character or personality’ (p.204).

I’ve argued for quite some time that Bourdieu offers us a great description of the legitimation of power: of French middle class reproduction in the education system ([Bourdieu and Passeron 1977](#_ENREF_15)), through taste in *Distinction* ([Bourdieu 1986](#_ENREF_6)) and via masculine power in ‘*Masculine Domination’* ([Bourdieu 2001](#_ENREF_11))[[2]](#endnote-2). His searing analysis of French academia in *Homoacademicus* ([Bourdieu 1988](#_ENREF_7)), television ([Bourdieu and Ferguson 1999](#_ENREF_14)) and the art world ([Bourdieu 1993](#_ENREF_9)). But it is when he attempts to explain those without access to power who are governed by the functionalist ‘choice of necessity’ that his analysis weakens, as we see in *Weight of the World* ([Bourdieu 1999](#_ENREF_13)).

Tony Bennett ([2011](#_ENREF_5)) documents how Bourdieu’s analysis in *Distinction* contradictorily celebrates working-class hedonism but then denies the working class any capacity for making relational judgements of form:

The picture Bourdieu paints is one of absolute closure which, offering no way out of the restricting effects of necessity for any fraction of the working class, also deprives the class of any capacity to project social, political or cultural horizons leading beyond dominant class norms and value. (2011:15)

By reproducing the model of *Distinction,* modified via the CCSE (see Silva this volume) it is not surprising that the “GBSS” reproduces one of the fundamental problems with Bourdieu’s analysis, what Ranciere ([2004](#_ENREF_49)) identifies as both a disregard and snare for the working class who were minimally represented in *Distinction* -- only 14% -- because Bourdieu argued that they had uniform tastes. [[3]](#endnote-3) The very low working-class response rate to the “GBSS” was not purposive like Bourdieu,[[4]](#endnote-4) but a similar low response rate could have been predicted because it is a representation promoted by a major state broadcaster in an environment where the media currently appear to be dedicated to making the working class perform their ‘lack’ of value through various reality TV and supposed documentary programmes on poverty porn such as *Benefit Street*. [[5]](#endnote-5)

Knowing this makes the “GBSS” focus on elites sensible, as they are the ones who are likely to respond and the only ones who can be explained via Bourdieu’s “analytic scaffolding” (Bennett 2011).

**Values and Value**

How do we understand class without understanding the value forms that classification produces ? As Gregory ([2009](#_ENREF_38)) notes, all standards of value are expressions of power. Class is a historic representation of a categorization of a person’s value and this was always a moral classification. Through all my research (actually all my life) I’ve watched working class women dis-identify from being classified as working class by those with institutionalized power and authority, because they feel the *classification is a misrecognition of their value,* for when it is applied to them it is usually used to condemn or express contempt. They feel the classification represents them as excessive, fecund, irresponsible and pathological and they defend against it by performing respectability ([Skeggs 1997](#_ENREF_58), [Reay 1998](#_ENREF_50), [Lawler 2000](#_ENREF_43)). Why would they want to respond to a class calculator when they have spent their lives being represented and calculated as valueless?

The “GBSS” ‘class calculator’ is based on selecting *objectified* activities and events that are already value coded. As Elisabeth Silva shows, (this issue) by clicking the answer ‘I listen to heavy metal music’ her class categorization substantially shifted, see ([Brown and Griffin 2014](#_ENREF_17)) also in this journal. Our first year undergraduates played with the class calculator to work out how to game it; they knew how to compile a persons’ value. How consumption practices are valued is absolutely critical to how we understand the likely response. We know that when we answer ‘do you visit stately homes’ that such an activity has clear classed connotations. It’s just like a *Daily Mirror* survey from 1995 that asked people to chose between ‘I holiday in Tuscany’ and ‘I own a fighting dog’. It is therefore not insignificant that it was a majority of highly educated middle-class people in London, the south east and in university towns, that interacted with the class calculator website, although goodness knows what all the student gaming did to the final data. But what does it mean to play and game class? As well as trivializing the methodology does it also impact on how seriously class is taken? Does it just become a momentary bit of fun for those who do not have to live its effects?

The ability to institutionalize the *capacity to judge* which people, activities and objects have value, is, I’d argue, one of the main ways in which the middle class legitimate their own power. They have achieved this through the welfare institutions of the state for a long time since the moral categories of deserving/underserving were attached to those who applied for welfare support. The 1834 Poor Law gave middle class legal professionals the ability to make judgments of the habits of the poor, especially of mothers. It enabled middle-class women to enter public space as evangelical social workers in the name of saving the deserving working-class woman. By claiming the right to judge standards of health and care a whole professional classed group has now been institutionalized via welfare, law and education, who put into effect classed moral judgments, such as whether your child is taken into care, whether you get access to housing, what sort of sentence you will receive if you riot, etc.

Academic questionnaires that use pre judged and evaluated categories of behaviour enter into this institutionalization of judgement. When the “GBSS” claims it is relational it is this sort of moral relation, fundamental to the generation of classed, raced and gendered difference since the inception of classifications in the sixteenth century based on monstrosity,[[6]](#endnote-6) that I would want to question. A fundamental power relation that cannot be accessed and understood through the method of MCA.

However, following through on the significance of representation, what the “GBSS” revealed in bucket loads was the performance anxieties of the middle class, desperate to know how they are located and placed in relation to others. In a nation where middle-class children are made to enter into fierce competition and are subject to continual measurement of performance from a very early age, and where comparison to others is encouraged and institutionalized, “are we good enough?” is a question that haunts middle-class life in particular, argues Andrew Sayer ([2005](#_ENREF_57)). When the middle class are increasingly forced to perform their value and when that value is measured by digital counting and impact on social media (Facebook friends, Twitter connections, Klout score, and H-index, Altmetrics, etc. for academics ([Burrows 2012](#_ENREF_19))), checking and counting one’s value has become central to claiming one’s value. The tweets, blogs and Facebook responses to the GBCS illustrated the amplified anxiety.

Even the ironic responses such as ‘The Emergent Service Worker’s Party’ revealed an obsession with calculation, competition and comparison, but also a confidence to play with classification. I am hoping that at some point a media theorist will interrogate the hysteria of the response. When the measure of class stands in for the value of the person, symbolic legitimation is at stake.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Just as Bourdieu has been repeatedly criticized for performatively bringing into effect that which he critiques (taste classifies as it names)([Cook 2000](#_ENREF_24)), the “GBSS” does the same. Any attempt to describe distinctions within symbolic systems of value cannot help but reproduce those symbolic value distinctions – somebody somewhere made decisions about which practices to include – drawing on a long symbolic history. I think what is most significant is what it *does not include*, all those practices of working class life that are valued, that involve just being with, hanging around, listening to, being funny, sharp, anti-pretentious, being caring, etc. all the things that working class ethnographies reveal, that cannot be objectified into an event and measured. These are the activities that Les Back ([2015](#_ENREF_3)) argues require an eye for detail and attentiveness to the seemingly unimportant, the mundane and unremarkable. They are the activities that reveal our orientations to others, the episteme that underpins our social relations. They are very difficult to capture, as anybody who has been subject to the glance of the judgemental gaze or the shrug of contempt and the eyebrow raising responses, will know.

Class is also about what we do NOT do. In our research on reality TV we found stark class differences between our middle-class respondents, for whom every minute of time appeared to be an opportunity to increase their value as they accumulate for the future, in comparison to the working-class respondents who did not consider time to be something that could be wasted ([Skeggs and Wood 2011](#_ENREF_60)).

Stratification theorists have argued that Marxist understandings do not work because the labour theory of value is no longer significant in a world of financialization. Yet, as David Harvey ([2008](#_ENREF_41)) charts, it is precisely the new forms of financialization and privatization that pave the way for accumulation by some from the dispossession of others in the present. This process is writ large in the current struggles to protect homes in London, where young single mothers (E15), amongst many other social housing residents, fight against the privatization of their homes, for sale to property developers. [[8]](#endnote-8)

I’d argue we don’t need a labour theory of value to understand contemporary forms of exploitation based on labour, energy and time, as long as we understand the history of primitive accumulation in the making of capitalism. In fact I’d stress that it is the politics of social reproduction that are critical to our understandings of class. As James Carrier ([2012](#_ENREF_21)) notes, Marx developed the labour theory of value for connecting the moral and philosophical to the economic, for understanding how capitalism makes human creativity into an abstraction for value extraction. This process continues apace.

For me the ability to use the time of others in whatever form (eg via the service economy, caring labour, entitlement to attention, etc.) is what is significant to making and maintaining the class relation. As ethnographers of class have long shown, the ability to access and use other people in the making of one’s life is a class relation of exploitation. As Yasmin Gunaratnam ([2014](#_ENREF_40)) notes, on the other side of our sick beds in the UK, there is a global class issue: the ‘perverse subsidy' of migrant labour from resource-poor nations that underpins our health and social care systems. A recent survey conducted by Wetherell, an estate agent catering to the elite, the international super-rich, uncovered the startling fact that there are more servants now working in the London area than there were 200 years ago. The survey revealed that in Mayfair 90% of the 4,500 people who own houses, and 80 per cent of those with flats, have their own servants. In 1790, there were only 48 servants living in Mayfair and working for its 1,500 residents.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Likewise, the ability to exclude others from areas of life where value can be accessed, achieved and converted is also central to the politics of class as Bourdieu ([1989](#_ENREF_8)) and Michelle Lamont ([1992](#_ENREF_42)) have detailed. As Bertoncelo (this volume) notes, class is not just about positions in social space but also strategic locations. Nicola Rollock ([2014](#_ENREF_51)), in a critique of the GBCS, shows how middle class spaces (including spaces of the state such as education) are carefully defended by the white middle class against the Black middle class. The anxiety of loss always haunts those whose value is based on possession.

Legitimating exclusion reaches its logical counterpoint in imprisonment. Incarceration of young Black men in the US is for Wacquant ([2010](#_ENREF_65)), central to how one class can institutionalize its interests by mobilizing the state in response to its own social insecurity. Monetizing incarceration results in accumulation through dispossession, with capital and governance in synch ([Gilmore 2007](#_ENREF_35)).

If we think of time and energy as resources, a relational understanding of class would include how the labour (time and energy) of one group services the capacity to *have time and energy* of another. This is why stratification cannot *explain* class. The “GBSS” understood culture to be property and possession distributed through gradation. This understanding cannot explain why some groups are subject to dispossession and the ‘biopolitics of disposability’, and why and how this process is legitimated and institutionalized.

**Different cultural trajectories**

The “GBSS” has a very different understanding of culture to both Bourdieu and that of British *Cultural Studies* who put anti-racism and feminism onto the British academic agenda, which slowly seeped into traditional sociology ([Skeggs 2008](#_ENREF_59)). As Stuart Hall notes, the 1980s and 90s were periods of intense political and academic struggle over different cultural formations. Alongside the feminist class theorists mentioned above were the race and class theorists of culture such as Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Les Back who ask ‘whose culture’? and explore how culture is made.

The feminist race theorists such as Avtar Brah ([2014](#_ENREF_32)), Heidi Mirza ([1993](#_ENREF_47)), Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar ([1984](#_ENREF_1)) were early pioneers of intersectionality, responding to the anti-racist challenges of Hazel Carby ([1982](#_ENREF_20)), and worked through in studies of race, sexuality and masculinity by Kobena Mercer ([1987](#_ENREF_45), [1988](#_ENREF_46)), and sexuality and the question of woman by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey ([1991](#_ENREF_33)), to name but a few. They all challenged uni-dimensional understandings of culture. Culture was always in the making, in the interscies between forms of power. The titles of early key works such as Phil Cohen’s ([1972](#_ENREF_22)) *Sub-cultural Conflict and Working Class Community* or his *School for the Dole* ([Cohen 1982](#_ENREF_23)) and Paul Willis’ ([1977](#_ENREF_66)) *Learning to Labour: Why Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs* immediately signal what is at stake. This is very different perspective to the static understandings of culture made by the stratification sociologists (see ([Crompton, Devine et al. 2000](#_ENREF_26)). What I’m trying to get it is there were two very different traditions that ran almost in parallel, that were having radically different conversations about culture and class, which appeared to be speaking about the same thing, but they were not. The “GBSS” makes this dissimilar take on culture apparent.

**Conclusion**

At the 2015 annual lecture for this journal <http://www.thesociologicalreview.com/> our European editor, Sarah Green, in response to the lecture given by Imogen Tyler (based on the paper in this volume), noted how classificatory power is up-scaled in the contemporary political European crisis. Greece, she notes, is now pathologised, treated with contempt, classified as the badly-behaving, excessive, out of control lumpen proletariat of Europe, with Germany as the patriarchal, dominating, restrained bourgeois authority. It is this national allegory in which Greece becomes the working class in the European field, subject to the same processes of exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation, that enables us to see how classificatory practices are not just about class, but about legitimating power and exploitation. Classification is valuation.

As Tyler argues, following Ranciere ([2004](#_ENREF_49)), the most effective forms of class analysis are concerned not with undertaking classification per se, but rather with exposing and critiquing the consequences of classification.[[10]](#endnote-10) This is a substantial sociological and conceptual point that challenges the uncritical performativity of stratification analysis. This critique played out in the 80s and 90s in ferocious debates between anti-racists who challenged the term race and others who promoted multi-culturalism. Feminist theorists have long questioned the term ‘woman’ as being racist, hetero and essentialising. Gay was re-signified and queer was promoted as a verb – to make queer, not as a classification. Trans is seen as a challenge to traditional gender classifications. These are political challenges to concepts, challenges that understand the power of classification and the interests and processes by which classification is produced: imperialism, patriarchy, heterosexuality, and capitalism. Some excellent studies were able to show how these processes and their objectified classifications worked in constitutive and disruptive ways, with and against each other ([McClintock 1995](#_ENREF_44)). It is here where the “GBSS” definition of culture and that of the cultural studies tradition radically differs. The “GBSS” team work with the product, the objectification, and not the process. The “GBSS” papers in this volume provide maps of stratification.

But also we need to consider a point made by anthropologist Terence Turner ([1979](#_ENREF_63)) who argues that the ultimate stakes of politics is not just the struggle to appropriate value but the struggle to establish what value actually is and define it. Classification, its representation and mechanisms are central. Concepts are performative and the concept of class brings different things into perspective. This introduction is therefore part of a struggle over perspective. What is the question that the concept class is designed to address? Asking this question is crucial at a time when the discourse of inequality is more and more a vehicle for legitimating the upward redistribution of wealth. It is the victors spilling crocodile tears as they survey the wreckage of the class battlefield (witness the commentary emanating from The Economist, Davos, OECD, World Bank etc. recently). These interest groups that represent capital are concerned with how such stark divisions in wealth are putting brakes on their potential to profit.

In order to answer the question of how can such stark divisions exist? I take a perspective that can answer. A report by Lord Darzi ([2008](#_ENREF_28)) into health care in London notes that if you travel east, seven stops on the Jubilee line from Westminster to Canning Town, the average life expectancy for men drops a year for each stop, from 77.7 years to 70.7 years. This horrific fact demonstrates that we need robust statistical data on the manifestation of divisions of inequality (such as occupation and health), but we also need to understand how can this be allowed to happen and what are the mechanism for change. As Gregory (2009) and Graeber (2011) note, prioritizing consumption patterns may not help. I’d argue that as sociologists, trained in conceptual reflexivity, we should not collude in the reproduction of the normative through the performative. Culture is the site of many struggles, not just status and stratification, but also those concerned to question the processes of exploitation, domination, dispossession and devaluation and their legitimation through classification.

Amos, V. and P. Parmar (1984). "Challenging Imperialist Feminism." Feminist Review **17**: 3-19.

Arnot, M. (1979). "Cultural Reproduction: the Pedagogy of Sexuality." Screen Education **32/33**: 141-153.

Back, L. (2015). "Why Everyday Life Matters: Class, Community and Making Life Livable." Sociology.

Beck, U. (1992). Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity. London, Sage.

Bennett, T. (2011). "Culture, Choice, Necessity: A Political Critique of Bourdieu's Aesthetic." Poetics **39**(6): 530-546.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. London, Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1988). Homo Academicus. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1989). "Social Space and Symbolic Power." Sociological Theory **7**: 14-25.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2000). Pascalian Meditations. Cambridge, Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (2001). Masculine Domination. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (2008). The Batchelors Ball. Cambridge, Polity.

Bourdieu, P., et al. (1999). The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. and P. P. Ferguson (1999). On Television, New Press.

Bourdieu, P. and J.-C. Passeron (1977). Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture. London, Sage.

Bradley, H. (2014). "Class Descriptors or Class Relations? Thoughts Towards a Critique of Savage et al." Sociology **48**(3): 429-436.

Brown, A. R. and C. Griffin (2014). "‘A cockroach preserved in amber’: the significance of class in critics' representations of heavy metal music and its fans." The Sociological Review **62**(4): 719-741.

Burawoy, M. (2012). "The Roots of Domination: Beyond Bourdieu and Gramsci." Sociology **46**(2): 187-206.

Burrows, R. (2012). "Living with the h-index? Metric assemblages in the contemporary academy." The Sociological Review **60**(2): 355-372.

Carby, H. (1982). White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood. The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain. CCCS. London, Hutchinson**:** 212-236.

Carrier, J. G. (2012). A Handbook of Economic Anthropology, Second Edition, Edward Elgar.

Cohen, P. (1972). "Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community." Working Papers in Cultural Studies: University of Birmingham **2**.

Cohen, P. (1982). "School for the Dole." New Socialist(Jan/Feb): 3-4.

Cook, J. (2000). Culture, Class and Taste. Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change. S. Munt. London, Cassell**:** 97-113.

Crompton, R. (1993). Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates. Cambridge, Polity.

Crompton, R., F. Devine, M. Savage and J. Scott, Eds. (2000). Renewing Class Analysis. Oxford, Blackwell.

Crompton, R. and M. Mann, Eds. (1987). Gender and Stratification. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Darzi, L. (2008). High Quality Care for All: NHS Next Stage Final Report, Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Health by Command of Her Majesty. **CM7432**.

Davies, M., and Naffine, N. (2001). Are Persons Property? Legal Debates about Property and personality. Dartmouth, Ashgate.

Devine, F. (1992). Affluent Workers Revisited: Privatism and the Working Class. Edinburgh, Edinburgy University Press.

Devine, F. (1997). Social Class in America and Britain. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press.

Ellis, B. (2014). Real-Time Analytics: Techniques to Analyze and Visualize Streaming Data, Wiley.

Franklin, S., C. Lury and J. Stacey, Eds. (1991). Off-Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies. London, Harper Collins.

Giddens, A. (1991). Modernity and Self-Identity; Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge, Polity.

Gilmore, W., R. (2007). Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalising California. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press.

Goldthorpe, J. (1963). 1963 The affluent worker: political attitudes and behaviour. . Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Graeber, D. (2011). "Consumption." Current Anthropology **52**(4): 489-509.

Gregory, C. A. (2009). "Whatever Happened to Economic Anthropology?" The Australian Journal of Anthropology **20**: 285-300.

Griffin, C. (1985). Typical Girls: Young Women from School to the Job Market. London, Routledge.

Gunaratnam, Y. (2014). "Diasporic walking sticks." Retrieved 14.02.15.

Harvey, D. (2008). "The Right to the City." New Left Review **53**(Sept-Oct): 23-40.

Lamont, M. (1992). Cultivating Differences: Symbolic Boundaries and the Making of Inequality. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Lawler, S. (2000). Mothering the Self: Mothers, Daughters, Subjects. London, Routledge.

McClintock, A. (1995). Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context. London, Routledge.

Mercer, K. (1987). "Black Hair/Style Politics." New Formations **3**: 33-54.

Mercer, K. a. J., I. (1988). Race, Sexual Politics and Black Masculinity: A Dossier. Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity. J. R. Chapman and Rutherford. London, Lawrence and Wishart**:** 97-165.

Mirza, M. (1993). Young, Female and Black. London, Routledge.

Radin, M. J. (1993). Reinterpreting Property. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Ranciere, J. (2004). The Philosopher and his Poor. Durham, Duke University Press.

Reay, D. (1998). Class Work: Mother's Involvement in Their Children's Primary Schooling. London, UCL Press.

Rollock, N. (2014). "Race, Class and ‘The Harmony of Dispositions’." Sociology **48**(3): 445-451.

Rose, D. and D. Pevalin (2010). Re-basing the NS-SEC on SOC2010; A Report to ONS. <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/classifications/current-standard-classifications/soc2010/soc2010-volume-3-ns-sec--rebased-on-soc2010--user-manual/index.html>, ONS/University of Essex.

Savage, M. (2000). Class Analysis and Social Transformation. Buckingham, Open University Press.

Savage, M. (2003). "A New Class Paradigm? Review Article." British Journal of Sociology of Education **24**(4): 535-541.

Savage, M., J. Barlow, P. Dickens and T. Feilding (1992). Property, Bureaucracy and Culture: Middle-Class Formation in Contemporary Britain. London, Routledge.

Savage, M., F. Devine, N. Cunningham, M. Taylor, Y. Li, J. Hjeibrekke, B. Le Roux, S. Freidman and A. Miles (2013). "A New Model fo Social Class; Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment." Sociology **DOI: 10.11177/0038/038513481128**: 1-34.

Sayer, A. (2005). The Moral Significance of Class. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Skeggs, B. (1997). Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable. London, Sage.

Skeggs, B. (2008). "The Dirty History of Feminism and Sociology: or the War of Conceptual Attrition." Sociological Review **56**(4): 670-689.

Skeggs, B. and H. Wood (2011). "Turning It On is a Class Act: Immediated Object Relations with the Television." Media, Culture and Society **33**(6): 941-953

Skeggs, B. and H. Wood (2012). Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience, Value. London, Routledge.

Thompson, E. P. (1966). The Making of the English Working Class. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Turner, T. (1979). "Anthropology and the Politcs of Indigenous People's Struggles." Cambridge Anthropology **5**(1): 1-43.

Walkerdine, V. and H. Lucey (1989). Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socialising Daughters. London, Virago.

Waquant, L. (2010). "Crafting the Neo-Liberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare and Social Insecurity." Sociological Forum **25**(2): 197-221.

Willis, P. (1977). Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs. Farnborough, Hants., Saxon House.

1. Office for National Statistics 2012, Institute for Fiscal Studies 2013. For the 2014 data see http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/personalfinance/10835538/Who-holds-Britains-wealth-12-facts-three-charts.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Bourdieu, P. (2008). The Batchelors Ball. Cambridge, Polity., is a tragic description of peasant masculinity. However it is theorized in terms of urban/rural, modern/traditional, rather than through the intricacies of gender. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The sample design comprised 166 (14%) working-class respondents compared to 584 (48%) middle-class and 467 (38%) upper-class respondents (Bennett 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Hard to quantify as the working class are divided into three groups – the traditional working class, emergent service workers and the precariat (which appear to be more age based, include a large proportion of students at elite universities so is not helpful). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Sociological Research Online 19 (3), 2, for a special Rapid Response section on ‘Representations of the Poor and the Politics of Welfare Reform – ‘Benefit Street’ and Beyond’. <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/19/3/> and a study of audience responses in Skeggs, B. and H. Wood (2012). Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience, Value. London, Routledge. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See https://values.doc.gold.ac.uk/blog/category/articles/ [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. The Twitter #GBCS has been overrun by the Global Business Consulting Service, Green Belt and Countryside Study and the General Board of Church and Society, but is still worth checking. More serious analysis on blogs includes http://sciarts.co.uk/category/gbcs/ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/24/the-city-that-privatised-itself-to-death-london-is-now-a-set-of-improbable-sex-toys-poking-gormlessly-into-the-air [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/lifestyle/10024092/Are-you-being-served.html [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See our website for the podcast of Imogen Tyler’s annual lecture http://www.thesociologicalreview.com/ [↑](#endnote-ref-10)