

# Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

## **Social Class and Identity**

Some people say that Britain has become a 'classless' society but recent research (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2007) suggests that class still matters.

'The 'social apartheid' between the richest and poorest is growing. Much of prosperous Britain has no contact with the poor. The two classes exist in parallel but absolutely separate universes. The Rowntree report seems naive, however, in suggesting that social apartheid between rich and poor is a new phenomenon. It has always been there, bridged only by the great underclass who once worked as domestic servants.' (Max Hastings, *Daily Mail* 17.7.07 How Labour's betrayed the working class).

Social class is one of the many things which can determine people's identity in the UK. It's hard to explain because it is composed of so many aspects and goes way beyond questions of wealth. A millionaire might identify as working class and an aristocrat might be penniless. Class in the UK could be about the way you talk and the way you walk, your clothes, where you holiday, the food you eat, how you bring your children up and for sure where you choose to send them to school. It can determine job opportunities, life span and your health.

'Despite all best efforts, Britain continues to have one of the greatest class divides in education in the industrialised world. The socio-economic attainment gap is evident as early as 22 months, and widens as a child gets older. There has also been no improvement in the number of poor children going to university.' (*Teachers TV* 31<sup>st</sup> July 2007)

'Something that white working class people share with all other social and ethnic groups in Britain is pride. They have a value system and a long tradition of proud labour and yet they are aware that they are seen as having less worth in the eyes of what they call posh people. If you imply that someone's culture is valueless and then offer up another culture which you tell them is of more value, they're going to react. If you attack someone's culture, you attack them. And this attack will cause a defensive reaction. You've got to know where you are before you know where you want to go. You need to understand where you're coming from. (Phil Beadle, *White Underachievement*, *Teachers TV*, July 31<sup>st</sup> 2007

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Some people are quite clear how their identity is shaped by class:

“My knowledge of my family history extends back as far as my grandparents and the little I know is very important to me. My father is a carpenter's son and there is a strong socialist tradition on my father's side of the family which has been handed down to my brother and me. My mother's family was huge (she was one of ten brothers and sisters). Her father worked the banana plantations in Tenerife. Both my parents were psychiatric nurses and I am very proud of that, as I am of most of my family history. The reason for this is that I identify strongly with the working class and the values it represents (work ethic etc.)”. (Francesco Torazzo)

Susie's experiences reflect the lasting power of class identity:

'Having an English mother and an Irish father coupled with being brought up in a strongly working class 'Geordie' town made the issue of identity quite a large part of my life. I was a very academic child and academic ability does not sit well with working class people. My nanna, when she found out I was sitting O Levels said that I shouldn't be doing them as I was a woman and should be getting married instead. In addition when I was doing my A Levels my head of sixth form actually rang my mother up and said I would be better off getting a job to help the family as she knew we were struggling.

I find myself now in a position where I am of a class I call the 'educated working class' which sits outside of the working class because I've been to university (I was the first person in my family to go to university) and I talk about things that my family don't understand and aren't interested in. Yet I am not middle class as I don't have the middle class air of confidence I can see in my middle class friends and my accent belies my roots.

I have, against all odds, become successful. I went to university and got a very good degree in chemistry. I built up my own successful business and earn an extremely good salary (although one that is not secure!!). I am the only female member of a board of directors. To my family I am a complete oddity.

I live in one of the most prestigious estates in the north of England in a very posh house as far away from the council house I was brought up in as is possible. I feel at home here, not because it's a posh house but because it is so close to nature and surrounded by countryside and animals. If anything is a driving force that identifies me and my brother it is shared poverty and the need to make sure we don't end up poor like our parents.'

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Historian Robert Colls summarises some of the complexities of categorizing 'class' in the UK:

'Class structure had always been built on occupation – a view of work as basic to human identity. Only the upper classes rejected work as identity because they could afford to do so. The middle classes preferred to talk about their 'profession' ...Industrial workers on the other hand understood what class structure was built on because it was built on them...Industrial class structure started breaking up in the 1970s. Even in its northern heartlands, organized labour became only one segment of the workforce. By the 1990s more people worked in occupations that resembled, but only resembled, the professions. The government reclassified class...For Marx, writing in 1848, only two classes mattered. In 1921 the registrar general made it six. By 1999 there were 17 official categories of class and far more talk of 'culture'. Class still matters...'

(Robert Colls, *Identity of England*)

For Deb, living on a council estate in London with her sons, there is virtually no aspect of life which is untouched by social class in the UK. She talks about education, leisure, housing, job opportunities and history:

"It really annoys me when people, the media, talk about identity and diversity as a code for 'black people' or 'ethnic minorities.' and 'they' are associated with being problematic. Also - so many white British people are not encouraged to see themselves as having a personal history. Everyone has an identity, roots, ancestors and stories. Why are people described as 'black' and 'Asian' and 'white working class' as if some black and Asian people aren't working class too? It's divisive to separate people along colour lines like that.

My youngest son talks about his identity as being on this estate – alongside the kids he's grown up with. It seems like identity is a bigger thing than colour, he hangs about with black and white boys. They're not a gang, they're just the people he feels comfortable with. He sees them differently to the way I might. I think they're quite badly behaved, not to me, not to people walking by, but doing naughty stuff, stealing bikes, which I understand is part of the informal economy, if you've not got the right kind of skills to get a job....But my son sort of looks up to them, not because they nick stuff but because, he says, they're kind...I said, 'What do you mean? They beat people up!' and he said, 'That's one thing....people are lots of different things...they show me how to fix my bike...and when I was being bullied on the bus, they protected me'. [OK they did hit the bully a lot]. Also things happen like, one boy, who's black and 17 years old and I just think, 'Where is that boy going to go?, What is he going to do?', apparently he's on my son's back to go to school. He tells him, 'Don't hang about, really truly get in there because it's a disadvantage not to'. My son wouldn't listen to me saying the same thing.

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My son's language is quite 'black', the sort of language I'd associate with black working class boys...At school there's only one other white boy in his class, they're all black, Indian, Sikh, mixed race, Chinese. They're all London boys with the same kind of interests...music.... It's interesting because when he went to primary school his friendship group was white and middle class. He was a 'Townie'...They were 'Trendies'....wearing baggies, the grunge thing and kids from estates were called Townies by those who were Trendies and who grew their hair and liked rock music. He used to get upset and I went into that school to say it's not tolerable that they call him Townie. The teacher was really working class and she addressed it and I'd imagine she talked about it. I think he started growing his hair so he wouldn't look like a cropped hair estate boy and then his identity took on a life of its own....He had reddish blonde long long hair. His friends at secondary school liked it. They call him, 'fish and chips'. It sounds racist but it's affectionate!

Once he said something about eastern Europeans and I said, 'O, a bit like your relatives then...there were lots of those that were eastern European and Spanish so basically your family is full of 'pikeys' and 'thieves' and then he went to talk to his dad and his dad has the same roots...going back quite a long time...My mum explained...some were pirates from Spain who ended up in Wales and mixed into the local community and married into it...My uncle has a family tree going back hundred of years.. I'm quite strong on all that, not just in terms of family tree. I stick things up in the loo about servants because my grandma was one...bonded labour...so hopefully he'll have a sense of that as important...One of the things I used to notice was how kids from African and Caribbean backgrounds had a greater sense of their identity than the white kids, who only saw themselves as being white. I don't think they knew that this is a city populated by different people for such a long time, it would be impossible to be just one thing...they didn't seem to know, didn't go beyond their mum and Nan...some knew they had an Irish Nan.

My son just did the slave trade at school and he felt the black and white kids were being pitted against each other and he got really angry about it as if all white people did this to all black people. Wasn't it much more complicated than that?...I told him that when slaves escaped in London it was often the poorer families who hid them even though they risked punishment because they knew about working for virtually no money and having rickets and TB and bonded labour, so it made them more compassionate. I think he was really cross because lots of the kids in class were his friends, black kids, and he doesn't want them to think, 'You must've been responsible' because he knows from his own family history it would've been difficult to own a ship and go off to get slaves!... I don't mean to diminish the experience of whole groups of people who were enslaved and it's still happening – look at the sex industry here or in China....stealing people and forcing them to make bricks.

I don't know if it's something to do with being a single parent, being overstretched, finding it all too much...I don't know but I definitely know that was happening to my oldest son's friends, regardless of their cultural background...Their mums just let them lie

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in bed and I think even if it kills you, you can't. You've got to tell them, 'You're not lying about; you've got to get up at 7' ...My son did a little local job because the alternative was to get up and mop the floor, shop and collect his brother from school...He got a week's work experience in a welder's firm...That led to a job and he's still there...Four years on and that bloke's paying for his apprenticeship. It's had a huge effect...So much harder than school...He couldn't go off sick. It's gradually but surely raised his self esteem...enhanced his sense of access to the world, like he pays for his own holidays and a lot of his friends have really failed to hold down jobs...I think he feels very rewarded...being able to spend money he's earned...He sees himself as a welder ...doing course work...doing his apprenticeship has given him a greater sense of, 'Wow! I can do this' ....He's a specialist...when you're learning, it reinforces your knowledge in a different way and broadens your horizons and he's said recently, he's thinking of travelling because there are opportunities for welders in other parts of the world. And he's thinking of taking a Spanish class and that comes directly through the welding experience. His boss is a working class lad 'made good', his dad started the business and I think my son sees what he has achieved, nice house, nice car. He respects him... It's hugely important for this group, making their identity important along with everyone else...not saying, 'you haven't got one'.