



The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how white working-class women are figured as the constitutive limit – in proximity – to national public morality. It is argued that four processes: increased ambivalence generated by the reworking of moral boundaries; new forms of neo-liberal governance in which the use of culture is seen as a form of personal responsibility by which new race relations are formed; new ways of investing in one's self as a way of generating exchange-value via affects and display; and the shift to compulsory individuality are reshaping class relations via the making of the self. By showing and telling themselves in public white working-class women are forced to display their 'lack' of moral value according to the symbolic values generated by the above processes. It is a no-win situation for them unless we shift our perspective from exchange-value to use-value.

KEY WORDS

class / culture / limit / morality / self

In 2003 I became aware of the significant role hen parties were taking in the shaping of national moral public culture in Britain. Since then the situation has become even more remarkable if not surprising. Shifting the emphasis from the 1980s political rhetoric, which figured the single mother as the source of all national evil, we now have the loud, white,¹ excessive, drunk, fat, vulgar, disgusting, hen-partying woman who exists to embody all the moral obsessions historically associated with the working class now contained in one body; a body beyond governance. But a body that signals class through moral euphemism, rarely naming it directly, hence relying on the process of interpretation to do the work of association.

This condensation into the figure of the immoral repellent woman is, however, not just a matter of representation. Our ESRC study of *Violence, Sexuality and Space* found, after a period of intensive research (with five researchers over a period of two years),² the major named threat to the security of Manchester's gay space was the 'hen party'. The hen party did not present the threat of violence, but the threat to comfort, ontological security and jeopardized the entitlement to hard fought-for gay space.³ To give a flavour:

Ali: Then you'll see packs of girls...

Raj: Mm, hen parties.

Ali: Hen parties, you'll see it all over the place when you'll walk past and they'll be scratching themselves and skitting themselves and all the rest of it but they will wait in the queue. You know, there'll be at least 15 girls or whatever.

(Manchester 2000, Asian gay youth group, facilitated by Paul Tyrer)

Or,

Lucy (bar manager, *Via Fossa*): We don't get hen parties or anything like that, you know, we're not like mainstream *Yates*' straight women. You know.

(Manchester 2000, key informant interview with Paul Tyrer)

The hens were variously framed by associations of contagion, pollution, danger, distaste and excess heterosexuality. Instead of operating as the constitutive outsider they worked from proximity within the space, disrupting safety, comfort and home. Even in a radicalized gay sexualized space, their heterosexuality on display via language and sexualized bodies (with dildos replacing necklaces) could not be tolerated, not *just* because of their hetero-sexualized presence but because their tasteless, loud, vulgar display made them intolerable; they became the limit sign to gay propriety and respectability, to homo-normativity.⁴

The 'hen party menace', a focus of media interest,⁵ preceded developments in other 'White Trash TV'⁶ detailing the noisy, out of place, ungovernable white working-class women, represented in TV programmes significantly titled: '*White Girls are Easy*' (C4) and '*Loudmouthed Women*' (C4). The hen party phenomena has been recently expanded into a media obsession with 'chavs' (white working-class men and women depicted as tasteless, excessive, ungovernable and atavistic. See Chavscum.com website, *Shameless* [C4] and *Chavs* [Sky One]). Chav became the word of 2004 (Oxford English Dictionary – celebrated in the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph*). Even the *London Review of Books* conducted a debate on the etymology of the term; which is highly contested.

The examples cited above are specific to the UK, but a glance at US TV illustrates how it has been working these themes in less specific and more race-inflected ways for some time, especially in the 'reality TV' talk show zone such as *The Jerry Springer Show* (see Wray and Newitz, 1997).

Even feminist commentators were in on the phenomenon:

She used to be conspicuous as she clacked along the pavements in her white plastic stilettos, her bare legs mottled patriot red, white and blue with cold, and her big

bottom barely covered by a denim mini-skirt. Essex girls usually come in twos, both behind pushchairs. Sometimes you hear them before you see them, cackling shrilly or yelling to each other from one end of the street to the other, or berating those infants in blood-curdling fashion ... The Essex girl is tough, loud, vulgar and unashamed. Her hair is badly dyed not because she can't afford a hairdresser, but because she wants to look brassy. Nobody makes her wear an ankle chain; she likes the message it sends ... she is not ashamed to admit that what she puts behind her ears to make her more attractive is her ankles. She is anarchy on stilts, when she and her mates descend upon Southend for a rave, even the bouncers grow pale. (Greer, 2001: 8)

Greer's comments were not dissimilar to Peter Mandelson (then a man of some significance in the Blair government, and now of significance in Europe), to the *Fabian Society*, which launched the *Social Exclusion Unit*.

We are people who are used to being represented as problematic. We are the long-term, benefit-claiming, working-class poor, living through another period of cultural contempt. We are losers, no hopers, low life, scroungers. Our culture is yob culture. The importance of welfare provisions to our lives has been denigrated and turned against us: we are welfare dependent and our problems won't be solved by giving us higher benefits. We are perverse in our failure to succeed, dragging our feet over social change, wanting the old jobs back, still having babies instead of careers, stuck in outdated class and gender moulds. We are the 'challenge' that stands out above all others, the 'greatest social crisis of our times'. (Mandelson, 1997, in Haylett, 2000: 6–9)

In attempting to identify the 'problem' for the audience, Mandelson reproduces and re-circulates the pathology that has been historically associated with the term class. Greer and Mandelson's characterizations contain and repeat nearly every item in the historical-representational moralizing, pathologizing, disgust-producing register attached to working-class women. The disparate discourses of familial disorder and dysfunction, fecund and excessive femininities, of anti-social behaviour, and of moral and ecological decay combine.

The most recent focus on eating and drinking adds to the 1990s government health pathologizing concern with mothers who smoke (Graham, 1994). The media turn to the unhealthy eating habits of the nation places specific emphasis on fat people, for example *Health of the Nation* (BBC2) and *You Are What You Eat* (C4). These 'fat' programmes predominantly expose working-class families, especially mothers, as incapable of *knowing how* to look after themselves and others, as irresponsible. Accompanying the increased visualization of the immoral and unruly woman is an obsession with street crime (in programmes such as *Street Crime* [Sky] and the majority of reality TV on policing) whose focus is usually drunken violent working-class men and women; but it is women's 'binge' drinking that has been highlighted as a significant threat, not only to the state of the nation, but also to herself. To smoke, drink, be fat and publicly fight and/or participate in loud hen parties is a national sin.

The significance of all this media interest is that white working-class women in particular are being marked as the national constitutive limit to propriety – an act which repeats moments of crisis in authority condensed and symbolically figured through the excess of the grotesque, weeping, leaking, excreting bodies of working-class women. Rose (1999) provides an elaboration of how working-class women's morality has been deployed during historical moments of crisis and social disorder. And McClintock (1995) demonstrates how in most nationalist quests for airtight invariant identities women are often assigned symbolically crucial roles as markers of the nation's moral values.⁷ Similarly, Papayanis (1999) shows how attempts to control the visibility of feminine sexuality often turns bodies of desire in to bodies of disgust using the language of moral outrage. And as Stallybrass and White (1986) have so extensively revealed, that which is made marginal is usually symbolically central. The excessive, unhealthy, publicly immoral white working-class woman, I argue, epitomizes the zeitgeist of the moment – a crisis in middle-class authority and security, epitomized in the output of TV, concretized in criminal law (Garland, 2000) and a handy figure for the government to deflect its cuts in welfare provision via the identification of a 'social problem'.

The proliferation, hence over-determination, of her representation is an attempt to reconstruct the boundaries of regulation and order and legitimate various forms of external state control and mechanisms of self-governance via the transfer of self-responsibility (neo-liberal governance). The excessive immoral woman is also a useful figure for cheap TV, providing the soft porn grotesque for titillation and disapprobation. But it is not just about governance and cheap TV, it is also about who can accrue value in themselves in a symbolic economy where cultural capital is becoming increasingly significant in making workers more 'enterprising', hence more valuable (du Gay, 1996), and showing who is a proper and responsible citizen.

This article maps the general socio-economic changes that can be identified as responsible both for the crisis in proprietorial authority and the projection of this crisis onto the body of the white working-class woman. These changes can be identified via four different processes that make the different sections of the article. First, I explore how our knowledge of moral boundaries is increasingly changing, fuelled by ambivalence as bad and wrong are converted to good and right. This redrawing of moral boundaries is both promoted and contained by new forms of state regulation illustrated in New Labour rhetoric in the second section of the article. The following sections (three and four) show how culture can be propertized in the making of the middle-class self; a process once enabled through the historical possessive individual is now reworked through the increased emphasis on extraordinary subjectivity and compulsory individuality. These new forms of subjectivity both destabilise traditional authority while also offering ways of reclaiming authority in the re-drawing of class relations. Yet they are not without challenge as I show in the final section.

This article comes to class analysis in two different ways. First, it hotly disputes the debates that suggest class is in decline; rather, it suggests class is so

insinuated in the intimate making of self and culture that it is even more ubiquitous than previously articulated, if more difficult to pin down, leaking beyond the traditional measures of classification. But traditional measures only represent one moment in the history of class analysis, namely the 1960s when sociologists become as obsessed with measurement (see Savage, 2000) as the tax inspectors who attempted to introduce the earliest classification systems. Second, it suggests a reversal of Marx, moving beyond (but still with) the economic – perceived to be a discursive system – into understanding value more generally to understand how class is made through cultural values premised on morality, embodied in personhood and realized (or not) as a property value in symbolic systems of exchange. The processes I describe work simultaneously across different sites and are solidified, concretized, condensed into bodies and personhood at different moments, generating different compositions and volumes of exchange-value (see Skeggs, 2004, for a fully developed analysis).

I. Ambivalence, Affect and Morality

In the search for new markets, for which the capitalist dynamic in a neo-liberal economy knows no boundaries, arenas which were once consigned to the state-regulated moral sphere are used to open up new markets. The prior historical separation of femininity from sexuality is being recombined, utilizing that which had been previously designated immoral and associated with the working class with new fragments of proto-individualistic post-feminism. *Sex in the City*, for instance, becomes a perfect example of how cult TV (HBO) breaks new markets by breaking old boundaries, as does *The L Word* (Sky) in which glamour is systematically associated with lesbianism. In these programmes issues that were once the preserve of radical post-feminist performance art (such as Anne Sprinkle's displays of female ejaculation) are mainstreamed, as are previously unspoken issues, such as discussions about the taste of male semen (*Sex in the City*). The repetitive proliferation, cataloguing and categorization of speaking the previously unspoken should immediately alert Foucauldians that a crisis is apparent. The expansion of explicit and excessive hetero-sexuality from one class of bodies to another generates an uncertainty about the good/bad moral value that can be known: the historical location of the immoral with the white and black working-class women as the site of sexual agency and contagion, is now in the contemporary extended into the category of the professional white middle-class urban women. The boundaries of the lascivious, dangerous and contagious are therefore no longer absolutely clear. This is an expansion rather than a transference process. For while black and white middle-class women become sites for the display of overt and excessive heterosexuality (and even lesbianism), white and black working-class women remain sexual objects; cleaved by respectability. It is the overall composition and volume of value that generates the way in which sexuality is read on different bodies.⁸ The central characters in *Sex and the City* can offset sexual pathology through

professionalism; they are unlikely to be read as 'Essex girls', as Manolo Blahnik shoes replace white plastic stilettos. The extension of sexuality, however, creates ambivalence, a dislodging of certainty, a potential crisis in ontological security and a disruption of secure boundary knowledge (Bauman, 1991).

The ambivalence of distinguishing good from bad is amplified by the increased proximity of different groups in everyday life (via public movement, transport, omnivorous taste, etc.). Bhabha (1996) notes that it is proximity that produces difference: it is not always the dangerous other that threatens, but the proximate stranger who is not as easily identifiable, so she is made so. She is therefore represented to such an extent that nobody could fail to recognize her and her lack of moral value. She is transformed into a recognizable figure: the figure of the constitutive moral limit in proximity.⁹

And the figure has to be easily recognizable, beyond doubt. For instance, in a reading of *Hillbillyland*, a study of representations of 'mountain people' in Hollywood film, Wray and Newitz (1997) document how the hillbilly figure designates a white person who is racially visible, not just because they are poor, but because they are *monstrously* so. The white trash cultures that signify *too* authentic and *too* primitive (or *too* noisy and *too* sexual) can be put to work as a source of realistic and fantastical menace to the middle class, as the 'Chav' and 'hen party menace' demonstrate.

The monstrous representation used to assuage concerns about ambivalence and proximity is central to theories of disgust. Disgust is one of the affective responses to monstrosity. Tomkins (1995), for instance, argues that disgust evolved to protect the human being from coming too close. And, as the work of Probyn (2000) on shame and disgust demonstrates, to feel disgust is to be fully physically conscious of being within the realm of uneasy categories. As she notes, in disgust people are just too close for comfort. Expressions of disgust enable one to repel because they rely on public acknowledgement, on public recognition. In other words, when something or someone is designated as excessive, immoral, disgusting, and so on, it provides collective reassurance that we are not alone in our judgement of the disgusting object, generating consensus and authorization for middle-class standards, maintaining the symbolic order. Lawler (2002) shows how attributions of immorality, irrationality and stupidity were condensed onto the body of the working-class mother during the anti-paedophile protests in the UK, enabling the middle-class male journalist to revel in his self righteous disgusted response. Disgust repels. It is visceral as well as metaphoric and rhetorical: Bourdieu (1986) describes how particular tastes can be 'sick making'.

Yet, disgust is also transferable and can be put to work as a middle-class resource, for instance when put to use in art galleries. Young (2000) shows how disgust unbalances moral certitude, thereby demanding regulation. Drawing on the examples of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* and *Myra* by Marcus Harvey, she details the socio-legal responses that reveal a crisis in propriety boundary construction because of the possibility that art can also be disgusting.

But it is not just moral and physical repulsion generated by ambivalence and proximity; for centuries theorists have documented how disgust is simultaneously about *desire and* revulsion. For Benjamin (1978) the tension between disgust and the fact that we cannot deny that which revolts us constitutes 'the paradox of the moral demand'. The ethical imperative is to be found in an acute awareness of disgust; it cannot be simply erased but rather constantly elicits 'simultaneously the overcoming and the subtlest elaboration' (1978: 67); or now in the contemporary, not so subtle.

The desire to mimic, emulate, attach and use the dispositions of the disgusting can be seen in recent affect stripping; a process whereby affects are detached from the body of production and re-made as an exchange-value when re-attached to the body that does not produce the same affect but can capitalize upon it. This process is apparent in the marketing strategies for the new middle class premised on promoting 'authenticity' (Gobe, 2001). Authenticity as an affect, Gilroy (1990) shows, is closely associated with the black and white working class. But it is only certain forms of authenticity that sell, those from which the feminine, artifice, vulgarity and the frivolous must be expelled: yet masculine dirt, sexuality and alienation have long been used to sell music.

Affects are increasingly employed in the selling of lifestyles to those materially sated: danger, adventure and risk are experiences used to sell products; it is the *experience of affect* rather than the product itself that becomes the most important selling point. 'Choosing' affective experience is also used as a way of revealing ethical personhood, a display of the improving moral self, of accruing to oneself experience and the moral properties of experience that display a good, interesting, adventurous, risk-taking person. Choosing danger, adventure and risk may enhance personal exchange-value and speed promotion for the middle class (see Brooks, 2001); for the working class it is likely to result in imprisonment.

Affect is also put to use by groups making political claims; the use of the claim of injury and trauma by groups mobilizing identity politics has been extensively documented by Ahmed (2000) and Brown (1995). Berlant (2000) goes so far as to argue that US personhood is now shaped through the imperative for the citizen to display trauma; displacing everyday suffering for high-impact affect.¹⁰ But only some people can or would want to politically mobilize their affects. Working-class women are more likely to refuse victimhood, cover up injury and endure to display that they can cope (Skeggs, 1997).

2. State Regulation

While new markets are opened, broken, or bombed into existence, national state regulation is disrupted and reformed with some groups opened out for the market, for example gay men, while others become subject to more intense state regulation. For instance, tracing the evolution of New Labour rhetoric, Haylett (2001) identifies a proliferation of 'concern' around 'poor abject whites'.

Similarly, Levitas (1998), Morris (1994) and Fairclough (2000) reveal the increasing use of 'underclass' discourse to reproduce the historical division of respectable and abject within the working class. The rhetoric surrounding the race riots in the north of England in 2001 consistently portrayed the white working class as racist, useless, pointless and a blockage to global modernity, a functional figuring that allows the middle class to position themselves as the vanguard of cosmopolitan modernity and draw divisions between different forms of whiteness: pure and dirty white, thereby disrupting the order of white privilege. The rhetoric reveals that whiteness does not naturally predispose people to social privilege and success while making the figural association between black and working class disappear (Haylett, 2001). This unhinging, as Hall (1996) demonstrates, enables culture to become the defining feature of race. The state rhetoric legitimates punitive criminal justice, intensive policing and 'community regulation' (e.g. ASBOs) and increased emphasis on self-responsibility.

3. Propertizing

Along with moral boundary ambivalence, affect stripping and racialized neoliberal state regulation, which all enable class to take new shapes and form new relationships via culture, there has also been a significant shift in what constitutes property, exchange-value and exploitation. These are obviously huge and contested debates. Here I want to emphasize how culture has become a property invested in the middle-class person in the tradition of possessive individualism and institutionalized through law. Propertizing, a term taken from legal studies (e.g. Coombe, 1993; Davies, 1994, 1998, 1999; Radin, 1993), shows how a relationship is established between property and personality. As a concept it enables an investigation into how some people make investments in their cultural characteristics, which can then be used to realize value in areas (such as the economic), protected by legal property rights. Davies (1998) details how property-thought, or thought of the proper, regulates not only the distribution of resources in society, but also our conceptions of self, knowledge, group identity, sexual identity, law and language. Property becomes no longer a thing, a relationship between a person and a thing, or a network of relationships between persons with respect to things, or even a bundle of rights. Instead, property is determined as a *set of entitlements*, which are exclusive to an owner, or to the holder of the proprietary *interest*. Only some people can utilize culture as a form of property in themselves, and only some are entitled to the culture of others.

The European social contract was devised on *relationships* between those who were *not* considered to be propertizable to each other. Pateman (1988) for instance, demonstrated how middle-class men related to each other precisely because they were *not* potential property for each other. Moreover, they were given public recognition on the basis of being a property holder; and subjectivity was not possible for those who did not own property.

Studies of the new middle class, such as Featherstone (1991) and Savage et al. (1992), have shown how central culture is to increasing the exchange-value of one's overall volume and composition of capitals. These theories of new middle-class formations also demonstrate that it is *how* culture is put to use which is significant (e.g. Bourdieu, 1986; Hage, 1998). So, the various new theories of the aesthetic, prosthetic, reflexive, rational, enterprising, omnivorousness and mobile self¹¹ all describe different relationships to culture (usually as accumulation or as experimentation), but what they all have in common is a presumption of *access and entitlement* to a range of cultures that can resource their self-making.

4. Extraordinary Subjectivity, Compulsory Individuality

These processes of boundary re-drawing, affect stripping, neo-liberal governance, political claims-making and propertizing would singularly simply operate as differences within their fields of markets, governance and law, but the cumulative force of their connections can be seen most obviously when we explore how they cohere in the current imperatives to subjectivity.

We are in a period of what Dovey (2000) identifies as 'extraordinary subjectivity'; a shift from grand narratives as the basis for truth claims to statements that the world no longer has purchase unless grounded in the personal, the subjective and the particular. Or what Berlant (2000) defines as 'intimate citizenship', and Rose (1989) 'governing the soul'. The impetus to these imperatives to subjectivity has been variously described as: the rise in the 'psy' sciences and the extension of 'expertise' into work practices and the everyday vocabulary of popular culture. Rose (1989) documents how the vocabulary, grammars of conduct and styles of judgement now proliferate across the practices of everyday life, especially across the media, and exert a presence in everyday conversation, for instance, in therapy speak. The significance of these pervasive vocabularies, which provide repertoires of trauma, stress, attitude, intelligence, self-esteem, fulfilment and self-realization, is that they are always ethical scenarios with maxims and techniques of self-conduct, offering not singular versions of personhood, rather, a plurality of forms of selfhood are represented as solutions to the dilemmas of existence.

It is up to the individual to 'choose' their repertoire of the self. If they do not have access to the range of narratives and discourses for the production of the ethical self they may be held responsible for choosing badly, an irresponsible production of themselves.

But, as revealed by historians such as Steedman (2000), Bennett (2003) and Poovey (1998), ways of telling and knowing are limited resources. The imperative to produce oneself through resourcing dilemmas relies not just on *access to* and control of symbolic resources, but also on knowing *how* to display one's subjectivity properly. Historically, for instance, the working class learnt to tell of themselves in highly specific ways in order to receive welfare, instructed by

legal interlocutors for whom narratives of redemption and respectability were necessary (Vincent, 1981). This was forced subjectivity, shaped by the interests of the powerful in regulating the powerless.

In opposition to the ethical self that can show its moral worth is the self that does not know how to tell or display itself correctly, it cannot claim or profess propriety. But what it does display are what Sedgwick and Frank (1995) and Valverde (1998) identify as 'diseases of the will' – failures of responsible self-control by those who do not know how to behave. They identify two forms of bad-will behaviour in particular: non-consensual and conduct that is excessive. Rose (1999) argues that these twin pathologies of freedom define the limits within which plurality, as choice and responsible exercise of the will, may be tolerated. The ethically complete self thus becomes an imperative: it has to be displayed as a sign of one's social responsibility, self-governance, morality and value. But this is not a level playing field and only some can display appropriately. And just as the hen parties mark the physical limit to propriety in public space, the reality TV talk shows display 'bad selves' – those who do not know how to tell properly and show that they cannot operate an ethical self (see Wood and Skeggs, 2004). These are subjectivities out of control, beyond propriety, excessive. They cannot accrue value to themselves because their displays devalue, visually calibrating the failures of self-responsibility. They provide a spectacle of subjectivity turned sour, an epidemic of the will, their own responsibility for making bad choices.

The ethical imperative to subjectivity is part of 'compulsory individuality'. Using the work of Strathern (1992b) and Taylor (1994), Cronin (2000) documents how discourses of choice are central to the western production of ideas of 'individuality': an individual defined by the 'innate' capacity of 'free choice', and this choice expresses and displays the inner authentic individuality and subjectivity of that person. Yet, as Strathern (1992a) demonstrates, within this politics of choice, the middle class have no choice but to choose. Cronin maintains that individuality is not an option but rather, for some, is the compulsory route to selfhood. Choice does not merely represent a pre-formed self imbued with potential, rather it is a performative enactment of self; one that only some can perform.¹² Others do not have access to 'choice', all they can display is 'lack'; lack of access to the techniques for telling themselves and lack of access to the right culture; they cannot perform the good self because they do not have the cultural resources to do so.¹³

These processes: increased ambivalence and the breaking down of moral boundaries, affect stripping, the extended use and propertizing of culture in the making of the exchange-value middle-class self, the breaking down of white privilege into the morally good and bad, the imperative towards extraordinary public subjectivity, which can be both marketed and used to make political claims, and the focus on choice, ethics and self-responsibility which visualize bad choice, bad selves and no value, collectively create the conditions whereby the associations between social groups and moral value are being realigned. Class relations are being made through these processes. Class relations seep into

the very public production and performance of supposedly private subjective construction, whereby access to resources, and the ability to propertize them, is one form that class struggle now takes. What is significant in the use of culture as a resource in self-making is *how different forms of subjectivity are made available to different groups*; subjects with and without value; different forms of subjectivity therefore constitute and display class differences.

5. Fighting back

There is therefore, I argue, a daily cultural struggle around authorization, in which those who are positioned to make judgements of other's subjectivity are continually de-authorized by those who are positioned to be judged. This struggle in authority has a long history. Vicinus (1974), for instance, identifies the critique of pretension as a central part of music hall entertainment in the 19th century, which provided a humorous critique of the uptight restrained middle classes, in particular those who attempted to make moral judgements of the working class. In a long and convoluted process working-class attacks on the restrained, boring middle class have produced the desire for the unrestrained, hedonistic working class, institutionalized in the term 'mockney' (mock cockney), used to apply to people like Jamie Oliver, Guy Ritchie, Nigel Kennedy and Mick Jagger who speak a form of working-class language, while clearly embodying every other cultural aspect of the middle class, leading 'pop star' Sophie Ellis Bextor to note 'It's virtually impossible to be middle class in pop these days ... it's really unpopular ... it's worse than being upper class or lower class' (*Guardian*, 2002). The attack on the middle class often comes from itself – aware of its desire not to appear pretentious (a wonderful Foucauldian instance of reverse-governance).

Lack of access to the circuits of symbolic production means that the critique of the middle class is more tactical than strategic (see de Certeau, 1988). There are specific moments, such as Pulp's '*Common People*' and certain output by *The Streets*, *The Jam*, *Eminem*, *Ms Dynamite* and *Lady Sovereign* where 'talking back' occurs. *The Royle Family* TV programme presents a sustained attack on middle-class pretensions. Yet, the middle class are likely to misrecognize the nature of the class hatred it contains; they must, since the show has won so many art-culture system awards. The 'piss-take', as Willis (2002) documents, endures in working-class labour; used to make the day more bearable. Moreover, to 'have a laugh' has been a significant way to stage resistance to authority. Willis argues, however, that the function of the piss-take is not just resistance to dull compulsion at work, but rather, a way of doubling; what is taken to be real is simultaneously maintained as fictitious, but also as a practical cultural form, in which the variable and ambiguous nature of labour power is articulated. From his argument we can see how, when applied to the symbolic realm of representations, *The Royle Family* works to expose the ambiguous nature of symbolic representation. But then it is set against copious amounts of

derision of the working class (such as Chav programmes like *Undercover Ibiza*, or wherever ‘documentaries’ and the street crime and fat people programming appear, alongside ‘cult’ comedy programmes such as *League of Gentleman* and *Little Britain*, which always have stock characters of fat female slobs). The real power of the anti-pretension critique is, I would argue, about challenging surveillance, about *not authorizing* those who have been positioned with more moral authority; it is about blocking their ability to apply moral value judgement.¹⁴

The ubiquitous critique of pretensions in European culture may be part of the reason why the middle-class respondents of Savage et al. (1999) expressed such a strong desire to be read as ‘ordinary’. Their research suggests a desire not to be read as pretentious, demonstrating awareness of, and a way of evading hierarchy and privilege in relationship to others. This could also be why in 2002 in a MORI poll, 66 percent of people surveyed claimed to feel ‘working class and proud of it’. More bizarrely, the poll also found that 55 percent of those who would be categorized as middle class by occupation, claimed to have ‘working-class feelings’. This displays what Sayer (2002) identifies as the embarrassment of class in which people both recognize and want to deny the privilege of their positioning.

Previous research showed how judgement was contested through the re-signification of respectability (Skeggs, 1997). Judgement is also contested through the critique of the pretensions of the potential judge. Yet one of the most effective ways to deflect devaluing is to ignore it, to enjoy that for which you know you are being condemned. To not contest, not even deride, but to steadfastly refuse the authority of the judgement and the value system from which it emerges, might be *The Jerry Springer* version of contestation, a rupture in moral judgement that breaks through the strictures of reality TV.

Conclusion

Frow (1995) proposes that in the contemporary climate it is productive to think of ‘processes of class formation ... played out through particular institutional forms and balances of power ... through desires, and fears, and fantasies’ (p. 111). Class, for Frow, is not a pre-existing slot to which we are assigned, but a set of contestable relations; it is not a given, but a process. It is the process of evaluation, moral attribution and authorization in the production of subjectivity that, I would argue, is central to understanding contemporary class relations.

To understand this requires a shift in attention from an analysis that assumes that the meaning of things is a property of the object itself (i.e. the working class are pathological), rather than the *response* to, or the *relationship* to the object (i.e., it is how they are being defined through the responses and power of others) within a symbolic economy. If the projection of negative value onto others is established as a central way in which class and gender divisions are drawn, then to read the site of projection as the ‘truth’ of the person or

object is to mis-recognize and mis-read one's-self. Attributing negative value to the working class is a mechanism for attributing value to the middle-class self (such as making oneself tasteful through judging others to be tasteless). So, it is not just a matter of using some aspects of the culture of the working class to enhance one's value, but also maintaining the *position of judgement* to attribute value, which assigns the other as immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable.

Therefore we need to think of property no longer as a thing, a relationship between a person and a thing, or a network of relationships between persons with respect to things, or even a bundle of rights. Instead, property is determined as a *set of entitlements*, which are exclusive to an owner, or to the holder of the proprietary *interest*. Exclusion from, and access to, objects, people and practices to propertize, are central to both the formation of middle-class subjectivity (in its various new configurations) and the exclusion of others from recognizable worth, that is, proper personhood). The decision to propertize or not constructs the object as property. So the ethical imperative is propertized when some people are proper and others not.

Any theory of exploitation, Goldthorpe (2000) argues, defines a process by which the holder of an economic property right obtains an advantage at the expense of persons without these rights. So when culture is converted into a property right at the expense of the person who cannot hold these rights to culture, then exploitation can occur. Just as it can through the ethical imperative to make oneself more exploitable through enterprising, optimizing and self-governance.

The relationships of entitlement and exclusion therefore establish the basis for cultural exchange, in which new forms of exploitations are shaped. But value is misrecognized in this process (only ever recognized as exchange-value), because those who are excluded from propertizing their culture are also excluded from the circuits of symbolic control and distribution. They are made immoral and valueless. It is the entitlement (which is propertized and institutionalized) to the culture (and often the labour) of the working class, and the ability to symbolically delegitimize the value of other forms of personhood that shapes contemporary class formations.

This is even more significant if we are in the political moment suggested by Fraser (1995), in which a political shift has occurred from redistribution to recognition politics, so that those who do not have a recognizable respectable identity cannot make political claims upon the state. The immoral, unable to be the proper respectable citizens demanded by the neo-liberal forms of governance, work as the constitutive limit; the limit to value.

But some dispositions are defended, the continual attack on pretensions across various sites of the media and the battles over the moral high ground of motherhood show that the authorization of entitlements is not without struggle. This is why I suggest that we turn our perspective to use-value, to that which is not exchangeable and cannot be put to use to enhance the middle-class self and produce proper personhood. Moreover, use-values can only be known

when they are put to use, so they force a focus on the ability to access and use culture. Use-value analysis would enable us to see how those who shape their subjectivity may do so from an entirely different value system, one which does not rely on the working class being positioned as the moral constitutive limit to bourgeois respectability/sensibility or a source for authenticity or derision.

Notes

- 1 It is significant that these representations focus on the bodies of white rather than black women, especially as black women in the past have been used as *the* sign of hypersexuality, suggesting that anti-racist struggles have had a positive impact to momentarily defend black women from representational degradation.
- 2 The project on 'Violence, Sexuality and Space' was funded by the ESRC (grant no. L133251031) from May 1998 to May 2001. See <http://les1.man.ac.uk/sociology/vssrp>
- 3 See Moran et al. (2001, 2003) and Skeggs (1998).
- 4 See Alison Rooke (2005) unpublished PhD for a development of the term homonormativity.
- 5 Following an article in the *Manchester Metro*, every national newspaper picked up on the 'hen party menace'. I was also contacted by Australian National Broadcasting, Australian radio stations, BBC radio, Channel 4 TV and Granada TV.
- 6 White trash TV in the UK began with the documentary 'social realism' or 'fly on the wall' programmes directed by Paul Watson on *The Family* (1974).
- 7 This process is most explicit in militarized brutal rapes in which women mark ethnic purity, continuity and territory.
- 8 Here, I use Bourdieu's different capitals: economic, symbolic, cultural and social (see Bourdieu, 1987).
- 9 This is not directly intentional, often more likely to be a product of lazy and cheap media production, in which copying is deployed.
- 10 The media coverage of the 9/11 event showed the extension of high-impact affect, enabling a spectacular suffering to reshape claims for nationhood.
- 11 See Skeggs (2005) for an account of all the new theories that describe new middle-class self formations.
- 12 See Wood and Skeggs (2004).
- 13 See Fraser (1999) on the limits to performativity.
- 14 This points to the problem with the exchange-value model of self deployed by Bourdieu in which the working class is always read as lack (see Skeggs, 2005).

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