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Dave O'Brien

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Class and the problem of inequality in theatre

Dave O'Brien

Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT

Theatre stakes a claim to represent individuals, communities, and nations. Yet both the workforce and the audience are marked by significant inequalities. There are absences of people of colour and those from working-class origins, along with significant gender inequalities in specific roles and specific productions. Awareness of these issues has, in part, been driven by recent research from social science. The techniques from social science that make inequalities visible can be at odds with the preferred modes of understanding inequality favoured by theatre practitioners. This paper is situated at the intersection of social scientific and theatre practice, considering the potential and pitfalls of methods of making inequality visible. In doing so, it frames the discussions that follow in the special issue, as well as suggesting ways that theatre and social science might have productive working partnerships.

KEYWORDS

Class; inequality; cultural and creative industries

Theatre stakes a claim to be an artform that represents and reflects society. British society is currently marked by a range of social divisions that stretch far beyond the cultural sector. As a result, inequalities in the workforce and audience for theatre should not be a surprise. British theatre and the associated performing arts industries are characterised by exclusions by gender, by race, and by class (O'Brien et al. 2016).

Class-based exclusions in theatre and performing arts manifest in a variety of ways. They are present in the employment statistics demonstrating the overrepresentation of those from affluent, middle-class, social origins, in key occupations such as acting (Friedman, O'Brien, and Laurison 2017). These same statistics make clear the absence of those from working-class origins.

Class exclusions are there in public discourses. Discussion of class, in particular the struggles and exclusions of those from working-class origins, is a persistent feature of media discussions. Some of these discussions involve older, more established working-class origin theatre practitioners worrying about the chances of people like them making it in the industry today. Others reflect younger working-class origin creatives sharing stories of class-based inequalities and discriminations. These sets of working-class origin discourses are counter-posed by the persistently consistent dismissal of class issues by those, most often men, from middle-class social origins. Even where those at the top of the profession are sympathetic to class inequalities, they struggle to make changes to their institutions (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020a (in press)).

CONTACT Dave O'Brien  d.obrien@ed.ac.uk  University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

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The class problem is also there in public policy. It has emerged as an issue given attention, and potentially subject to action and intervention, by cultural policymakers (Hussain 2018). Yet the means that public policy uses to understand the class problem raises doubts about the effectiveness of subsequent strategies for change.

In order to understand how policy is thinking about class, we first need to understand how British theatre's (and indeed the more general cultural and creative industries') class problem has been made visible. Making class exclusions visible to policymakers is not just a matter of public and media discussions. Making class visible also involves class exclusions being expressed in languages, and via methods, which fit with the process of public policymaking (Oman 2019a).

The extent of the class problem, as made clear by social scientific research, means policymakers have to act. Indeed, OFCOM (2019), ACE (Oman 2019a), and BBC (2018) have conducted research, produced guidance, and suggested interventions, in response to data on the class composition of their parts of the creative workforce. These possible interventions might give cause for celebration.

Yet, the social scientific process of making class visible carries with it important limitations. *Only* focusing on the demography of the workforce or the audience can obscure more fundamental structural inequalities. Policymakers may draw the wrong conclusions as to the mechanisms underpinning class-based exclusions. Making the problem visible may stand in lieu of making actual changes, and the sorts of interventions and strategies needed to fully address theatre's class crisis will not be developed and adopted.

Finally, there is the much more worrying question as to whether the predominantly middle-class workforce, along with the predominantly middle-class audience, really do want a different sort of theatre at all. Thus, class inequalities are likely to persist, casting doubt on theatre's claims to reflect and represent society.

Making class

Class is a tricky term. The papers in this collection are excellent illustrations of the complexity of class. The word, in addition to the social relationship it describes, is subject to struggle and contestation. There are a whole range of research literatures, capturing a whole range of positions, on class (e.g. Roberts 2011; Crompton 2008; Connelly, Gayle, and Lambert 2016; Savage 2015; Goldthorpe 2016). Summarising even the sociological research is far beyond the scope of this present discussion. Instead, it is worth drawing out two points.

First is the interrelationship between class as an expression of identity, and class as a social scientific category. The latter category is contested, but here the focus is on class as a category to help understand how society is structured and organised.

Second is the distinction between class *origins* and class *destinations* (see Friedman and Laurison 2019 for a full discussion). The distinction between *origins* and *destinations* is often marginal to popular discourses and discussions of class. The distinction is an essential component of the social scientific efforts to make inequalities in theatre, and broader cultural production, visible.

The sense of class as an identity can seem very different, or even opposed, to the way that class has been operationalised by sociologists. There is extensive and perhaps endless

debate over class in sociology. An important strain of current thinking draws from the Weberian sociology of John Goldthorpe and colleagues (e.g. Goldthorpe 2016). It is embedded in how the UK's *Office for National Statistics* sees class.

In this approach, class is best approached by understanding jobs and occupations. Positions in labour markets tell us a great deal about people's social position, alongside a range of cultural and social elements of their lives. Occupations also tell us a great deal about life chances and trajectories. Occupational approaches to class help us to see the impact of parental occupation on social mobility.

These approaches can also be used to see how the resources held and deployed by those in more privileged occupational positions end up enhancing their children's occupational prospects. As Jonsson, Grusky and their academic colleagues note in reference to the tendency of occupational positions to confer specific occupational, and thus class, advantages, '*it's a decent bet that our children will be professors too*' (Jonsson et al 2011).

Notwithstanding the limitations of this account of class (and indeed at the expense of ignoring the distinction between social class and social status that is central to Weberian understandings of society), the focus on parental occupation is important in the context of social mobility. Understanding parental occupation is crucial in providing the information about individuals when researching social mobility. The jobs individuals' parents did are a way of thinking about individuals' social *origins*. The jobs they end up in tell us about their *destinations*.

Parental origin sits alongside a range of other markers of social hierarchy. These include type of school an individual attended, an individual's postcode when they were growing up, their parents' income, and their parents' education. These are some of the ways that policy has recommended data can be gathered for the purposes of researching social mobility into elite professions such as the senior civil service, law, or medicine, alongside cultural organisations such as the BBC (Cabinet Office 2018; Civil Service 2018; BBC 2018). In turn, social mobility research is one means to make class visible.

Social mobility gives another example of the distance between academic uses of key terms, and popular or policy understandings. Academics look at the chances, or probability, of moving or staying in a class or income band (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018; Major and Machin 2018). They can study how rigid or fluid a society is over time, or in comparison to other societies. Policymakers, in contrast, have used social mobility in a much broader sense, equating the idea with a more general question about fairness in contemporary society.

This is the context for recent interventions on class, socio-economic diversity, and social mobility by cultural policymakers. The most prominent example is from Arts Council England (ACE). As part of its Creative Case for Diversity and the development of a new 10 years strategy for 2020, ACE has broadened the scope of its work beyond the core set of demographic characteristics that are given protected status under the 2010 Equality Act. Leaving aside the success, or otherwise, of ACE's work to tackle inequalities associated with, for example, disability, race, or gender, class is a central area of inequality. This is notwithstanding the fact class is not given the same formal status as gender or race in equality legislation, for example in the Equalities Act 2010.

The complexities of class, to which this discussion has offered only a brief introduction, present problems for policymakers. ACE worked with academic researchers to think

about methods of measurement and data collection (Oman 2019a, 2019b). This research was designed to help ACE understand the extent of the class ‘problem’ within its funded organisations, as well as to develop responses and interventions.

In doing so ACE can be placed alongside OFCOM, Cabinet Office, BFI, and the BBC as struggling to think about class. In the eventual guidance and associated discussion materials on socioeconomic diversity, ACE settles on an occupational question for collecting information. It suggests organisations ask ‘*What was the occupation of the main/highest income earner in your household when you were 14 years old?*’.

This question is in keeping with the ONS’s Labour Force Survey (ONS 2018), and is one of the suite of questions used by BBC and Cabinet Office. If ACE delivers on the promise of collecting this data then, over the coming years, the socio-economic, or class, *origins* of the workforce in National Portfolio Organisations that are funded by ACE will become clearer. Policy, and the public, will likely see, in granular detail, the exclusions of those from working-class origins that are visible at the aggregate level in nationally representative datasets. Making class *origins* visible will add vital details and nuance to our understanding of the extent of what seems to be a class crisis in the arts.

Is there a class crisis?

The sorts of categories and survey techniques that are of interest to policymakers tell us a great deal about the stratification of cultural consumption and cultural production. Within these general categories, we see class (as captured by occupation), education, social status, age and gender, all playing important roles in dividing those who attend from those who do not.

When looking specifically at class-as-occupation, we see creative occupations, including those in theatre and performing arts, as having much higher levels of attendance and engagement in culture as compared to those in other professional and managerial occupations, and very different patterns to those in routine or manual, working-class, occupations. This pattern holds if we consider other means of data collection, such as ticketing, and other ways of thinking about inequality, such as levels of deprivation in an area (Hanquinet, O’Brien, and Taylor 2019).

In the workforce, we see a similar story. If we look at actors, we see the dominance of those from middle-class origins, and the absence of those from working-class origins. Similar patterns, albeit not as gravely imbalanced, can be seen in range of occupations constituting the theatre and performance industries (Friedman, O’Brien, and Laurison 2017; O’Brien et al. 2016).

These patterns have complex and longstanding roots. Historical analysis of social mobility into key creative occupations suggests these class imbalances have been with us for a long time (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2020b). This is not to say that the broader ecology of creative activity, theatre included, has always had a ‘class crisis’. Yet, if we focus on workforce data from the last 40 years, we see the persistent problem of the relative absence of working-class entrants into key cultural and creative jobs. So, even when policy makes inequalities of class visible, and then tries to situate these issues in the current moment, there is a more persistent problem (see Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2020b).

These issues are partially grounded in labour market inequalities. Very few people at all will 'make it', in comparison to the numbers who would like to. Forms of solidarity may be difficult to sustain when individuals, of whatever demographic characteristic, are confronted with the demands of low or no pay, high levels of insecurity and uncertainty, and the unequal geography of creative production centred on London (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020b).

The harsh competition for entry to, and existence in, theatre and performance occupations are not experienced equally. Those from professional and managerial, middle-class, social origins are not only more likely to bring with them the economic resources, or capitals, to bear the costs of speculative engagements with an uncertain market for their ideas, talents, and labour. They are also more likely to have the cultural and social resources, or capitals, which offer them access to networks, along with the confidence that comes from having a sense of place and possibility within an industry staffed and attended by people like them. These social and cultural capitals pay off in the context of an industry where, in order to minimise the risks and uncertainties inherent within artistic production, hiring is, in a variety of ways, a form of cultural matching (Friedman and Laurison 2019; Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020b).

This focus on capitals and resources indicates the need to go beyond just understanding the demographics of ACE's NPO workforce. The demographic data allowing class to be made *visible* may be less useful for telling us about *why* class inequalities exist within theatre and performance in the first place. Indeed, part of the academic research underpinning ACE's recommendations were attentive to this problem.

Just knowing that working-class origin individuals are absent and underrepresented will not be enough to change theatre. Alone, it will certainly not be enough for theatre to justify its claim to represent and reflect society.

Currently, we might speculate that theatre and performance are predominantly middle-class industries and art forms. They have an audience and workforce that is reflective of that class position. In this case, the challenge is not how to equalise the demography of the workforce and audience. It is, in fact, how to transform the very nature of the artform itself.

Can there be a winner in culture's class war?

The start of this piece posed a set of distinctions to help understand the problem of class in theatre, and the associated policy responses. It stressed the importance of the occupational approach to making visible the demographic imbalances in the theatre and performance workforce. At the same time, it stressed that this will only *show* the problem, it will not *solve* it. Indeed, it is a live question as to whether the middle-class workforce and middle-class audience want this 'problem' solved at all.

This is not just a question of policy responses. There is much that theatre and performance can offer academic research on class. Class analysis has, over the last 20 years, foregrounded the cultural and social aspects of inequality that sit alongside the traditional focus on occupations and economic relationships (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009).

This cultural class analysis was inspired by Bourdieu's emphasis on the importance of culture to the social reproduction of inequality. One obvious example was BBC's *Great British Class Survey* and the subsequent *Class in the Twenty First Century* (Savage 2015).

Cultural class analysis was crucial in the formation of research underpinning the *Panic!* (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018) and AHRC funded *Who is missing from the picture?* Projects, and the subsequent *Culture is bad for you* book (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020b).

This approach has engaged with questions of social mobility, attempting to build on occupational approaches to understanding patterns of class exclusion, whilst probing the mechanisms underlying these patterns. In the case of cultural occupations, for example acting or television commissioning, we see problems that go far beyond the demographics of these occupations (Friedman and Laurison 2019).

As the papers in this collection forcefully illustrate, class in theatre is bound up with struggles over cultural expressions and what counts as legitimate; class is there in the feeling of belonging to the world of theatre; class shapes the right, or otherwise, to be present in the workforce and in the spaces of theatre, whether this is the drama school, the agent's office, the writing room, or on the stage.

Would equalising the socio-economic demographics of the workforce address these issues? In part, more equal demographics would mean people feel they belong when they have examples of success, easier and direct access to networks, and have shared life experiences to draw upon. However, the focus on making demographics more equal may draw attention away from greater structural problems.

Research on gender and racial discrimination in creative occupations is clear as to the limitations of the demographic focus. Herman Gray (2016) draws attention to the way that a focus on demographics has only a limited impact on the problems of racial exclusion and representations of race in American media industries. In Gray's analysis, the changing demographics of the USA media industries have been insufficient to address the power imbalances and the political economy of ownership and production that drives the representation of race on American screens.

Critics of social mobility have suggested that many programmes aimed at increasing working-class representation in middle-class professions places the burden for change onto working-class origin individuals, rather than demanding change from the professions themselves (see Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020b for a summary of these debates). These critical voices, along with extensive research on gender and race, suggest that only using a demographic approach to class exclusions will end up placing an emphasis on people shedding their origins to fit their destinations. This will be in contrast to the need for transformations within the institutions and industries that have so far excluded those from working-class origins, just they have excluded women and people of colour.

What is needed then, is a cultural class analysis of theatre. This begins with the occupational approach to understanding class origins to show the nature of the problem. It then moves to analyse the nature of the artform itself, to ask whether theatre is, as an industry, capable of, or even interested in, making the changes necessary to address exclusions and discriminations. This cultural class analysis might conclude that the reality is a theatre industry that needs to rethink its aesthetic hierarchies, social status, and claims to representativeness. In doing so the theatre and performance industries might be honest about both their political economy and their purpose.

Conclusion: new research agendas, old policy problems

Class presents a puzzle for theatre. The social scientific techniques needed to make visible the extent of class inequalities may strip out the kinds of personal and collective identity that are a focus for theatre. These forms of identity may be marginalised in favour of social scientific understandings of class as occupation. Even when the occupational approach adds the depth of cultural class analysis' interest in social and cultural capital, insights about class from theatre practitioners and researches are still at the margins of the discussion.

These 'technical' social scientific modes of capturing class make the problem visible. Yet the techniques, and the problem they make visible, may, as Oman's (2019a, 2019b) work demonstrates, seem initially distant from practitioners' understandings and experiences of class.

The other side of class, as an expression of individual, and perhaps most crucially, *collective* identity that will most clearly and comfortably be captured in cultural markers, may seem irreducible to the categories of the social scientist. If policymakers are to address the persistent class issues in theatre, they can learn from critics of social mobility and from critical race theorists of media industries. To do so will need a combination of theatre's own research traditions and the social scientific languages of public policy. Otherwise, we are likely to carry on reading the *unchanging* statistics on class-based exclusions, along with their intersection with other exclusions of race and gender, which are currently the reality of theatre and performance industries.

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Notes on contributor

Dave O'Brien is Chancellor's Fellow in Cultural and Creative Industries at the University of Edinburgh. He did a PhD in Sociology and has a BA in History and Politics and an MA in Philosophy, all from the University of Liverpool. He has published widely on all areas of Cultural and Creative industries, including cultural policy, urban regeneration, cultural work, public policy, and cultural consumption. He was an AHRC/ESRC placement fellow at the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, writing the *Measuring the Value of Culture* report and was an ESRC IAA fellow seconded to Parliament's Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee, providing research support for the *Changing Lives* report. He is currently working with the APPG for Creative Diversity. He is the author and editor of five books including *Culture is bad for you: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries* published by Manchester University Press.

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