The politics of 'ordinariness': Class, 'race' and social identification in Britain from the 1960s to the 1980s - Ben Jones (University of East Anglia)

What I'd like to do today is explore what sources from the M-O section of the Observing the 80s resource can tell us about the social politics of social identification among 'white' working class people since the 1960s.

The spring 1990 social divisions directive posed 35 related questions on class, race & national identity – and they provoked extensive, reflective responses about how people felt about for example, the monarchy, the establishment, snobbery & what it meant to be middle and working class.

While just about the only question that *wasn't* asked was 'what class are you?' the majority of respondents volunteered that information anyway. Of 18 respondents just six didn't self-ascribe & of the 12 that did four identified as lower-middle class and eight as working class. This is how some of them did it:

> I consider myself working class, proudly. I was brought up in a household of ordinary working folk. The man of the house worker as an orthopaedic cobbler & the female in a factory […] I myself have done many jobs from cleaner to being a secretary.
> **G218 Female; 44; Suffolk.**

> When I was a child & lived in Wales I always went to Chapel and we were nearly all working class. I was not the poorest as my father worked on the GWR … very poor children belonged to the unemployed people. The better off were children of teachers, doctors, vicars, local business people etc. It was easy to see then that we were in the middle. **S496 Female; 63; Newton Abbott, Devon.**

This kind of social identification – as ordinary and in the middle compared to other social groups – has its own history which is worth mapping out. Mike Savage has re-analysed data collected on workers' identities in Luton and Tyneside in the 1960s. Savage concluded that for these male manual workers: 'Ordinariness is a means of refusing both a stigmatized, pathologized identity, at the same time that it refuses a privileged position.'[1]

While affluent workers in early 1960s Luton were less likely to see their managers in class terms, in late 1960s Walsend, shipyard workers strongly identified managers & owners as part of a plutocratic elite. Similarly, when Fiona Devine interviewed factory workers in Luton *in the 1980s* she found extensive class hostility between workers & management at

Vauxhall. Importantly, by the 1980s those who identified as working class were as likely to express class based antipathy towards their employers and managers as they were to identify a wealthy elite whose class interests were opposed to theirs.[2] MO respondents did both, for example:

> Businessmen & women are middle class and they are a very nasty lot. Vey mean and very ignorant and no sense of humour but that is why they got where there are [...] This government is upper middle class. They represent big business and they are the craftiest lot that ever governed our country. **S496**

Antipathy towards 'the establishment' and the political classes more generally was particularly charged when respondents answered questions about race, diversity and national identity [Note directive design though – this is where they are asked about 'the establishment']:

> One of the consequences of the increase in the multi-racial society we now have in Britain and the establishment's reaction to it (by establishment I suppose I really mean the government and those do-gooders you always seem to find among the wealthy) is that the ordinary indigenous Britain who is white, Protestant & married does seem to have been put at a disadvantage with the law, with social services etc. I am I admit against immigration by people of any colour and feel that we should keep Britain for the British. There should be limits to which we pander to the immigrant groups and they should be more forcefully encouraged to conform to our ways and standards. When in Rome etc. **B1426 M 55 Alliance voter**

This particular use of the phrase 'when in Rome' conjures up the spectre of Enoch Powell, who 'like the Roman saw the River Tiber foaming with much blood'. And indeed the MO material can be usefully compared with similar reflections from the late 1960s. Camilla Schofield & Amy Whipple have analysed samples of the 100,000 or so letters Powell received following his 1968 Birmingham speech. Like Powell himself, many of his supporters utilised (and conflated) the issues of 'race' and 'nationality' in order to express fears, anxieties & visceral anger about a whole host of issues which they saw as related: imperial and national decline, disgust at permissiveness, lack of respect for authority & law and order.[3]

While these letter writers *did* imagine ordinary 'authentic' Britons as exclusively "White", we should not conclude that racial identities were simply prioritized over social ones. As Whipple notes:

> 'Their sense of embattled "whiteness" involved as much antagonism toward the "white" elites of Britain as the "black" commonwealth immigrant.'[4]

We can see a similar process at work in some of the mass-observation material. As Stuart Hall argues, identities can only function as points of identification because of their capacity to 'exclude', to leave out, to render "outside" abject.'[5] Almost no opprobrium was expressed towards 'the poor' or the unemployed by working class respondents. The groups *who were* stigmatised - those who provoked anger & sometimes disgust were sexual, ethnic & religious minorities. However, while a number of respondents displayed a sense of 'embattled' whiteness, minorities were much less likely to be advised to 'go home' (as the Powellites would have it) but were rather encouraged both to 'conform' or integrate and to stop demanding 'rights' or 'special privileges'. For example:

> When rules are made everyone should keep to them. When the Indians made a fuss because they could not put a [motorcycle] helmet on because they wore a turban, they should have been told to drive a car and that should have been that. We have a very small country it is not big enough to allow certain cultures to take over certain areas. […] I do think uniformity of language and culture is a desirable thing, they say when in Rome do as the Romans. **S496 F 63; Alliance/Labour; working class**

> A plural society is a bad thing. Class division was beginning to be eroded after the war when along came the first immigrants (Af-C) creating a new and visually obvious division. This division was starting to blur as they took up our culture and gave us bits of theirs. Then came the second wave of Pakistanis, Sikhs, Indians, and Bangladeshis. They had religious differences amongst themselves and formed tight insular groups bringing their [missing word] with them and clinging to it without any apparent attempt at integration.
> […] I think every demand for special rights is dangerous from whoever it comes. I always remember *Animal Farm*: "All pigs are equal but some pigs are more equal than others." I can never claim to be equal while I am asking for everyone else to regard me as different. Twenty-five years as a trade unionist taught me that any

special consideration to one individual creates a disadvantage for someone else.
R470 M 56 Labour voter; working class

While this 'approach was dominant among working class respondents, there were voices raised in favour of cultural pluralism by working class women:

I often befriend or am befriended by someone of a different cultural background […] Marriage between people of different cultures is not seen around here in Suffolk. Very occasionally the will be a white wife to a Black man. I admire them deeply […] I think in no way would it be good to have uniformity of language or culture. **G218 F; 44**

It is a good thing to have a plural society with cultural diversity. It forms a more tolerant society. It is good to see other cultures and beliefs. The "British Character" we would like to believe is as a Bull Dog – small and fierce, fights best when in the underdog position. The only drawback is when right wing elements turn us into National Front cartoon characters so proud of being Anglo-Saxon (if a little watered down) that we distrust and dislike other cultures <u>within</u> our communities. This is when our beliefs are dangerous and destructive. **L1002 F; 44**

One way of historicizing these complex & contradictory feelings about race & nation is to explore the shift away from integrationist frameworks from the late 1970s. David Feldman has recently argued, the integrationist approach to immigration which he says dominated government thinking in the 1960s & 1970s was displaced in the 1980s by a shift toward cultural pluralism. Firstly, powerful institutional and ideological bulwarks of integration and universality were eroded. As union power and influence declined sharply in the 1980s some Labour local authorities 'used the issue of equal opportunities as a mechanism for widening their support among ethnic minorities. Further, the 1976 Race Relations Act placed a statutory duty on local authorities to promote equal opportunities between people of different 'racial groups'. The advance of multiculturalism in this account was connected to the waning of trade unionism, & the social democratic commitment to 'universalism'. As we saw above, this was a cause of discontent among trade unionists & those alienated by identity politics.

Most significantly Feldman argues, there was a growing perception in Whitehall and Westminster that problems once associated with immigrants <u>now arose in relation to British-born members of ethnic minorities</u>. 'The idea that these difficulties could be solved by

assimilation (or for Powellites, by repatriation) of foreign-born subjects began to look unpromising.'[6]

Feldman argues that the Conservative government's response to urban unrest during the 1980s can be seen as evidence of a commitment to cultural pluralism. The Scarman report argued that the unrest was caused by 'racial disadvantage' of certain groups. The solution was to channel money, through the urban fund to local authorities with significant ethnic minority populations. While condemning the rioters, figures such as Whitelaw & Heseltine publically repudiated Powellism. Thus Hesletine stated: 'This is what we seek: not conformity from our ethnic minorities, not white people with black faces, but a society in which the variety of our people enriches our country.'

The extent to which such a commitment to cultural pluralism was anything more than a temporary expedient is questionable. Thatcher certainly did not share it. In 1978 she remarked in a television interview that people were afraid that 'this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture', promising to remove the doubts on numbers and respect 'the genuine fears and concerns of many of our citizens'. Like Powell she received a deluge of letters in support.[7]

Nor was "integrationist" rhetoric abandoned. An infamous Conservative election poster from 1983 demanded that minorities chose between being black & being British. As Gilroy argues, here 'Blacks are being invited to forsake all that marks them out as culturally distinctive before real Britishness can be guaranteed […] Isolated and shorn of the mugger's key icons – a tea-cosy hat and the dreadlocks of Rastafari – he is redeemed by his suit, the signifier of British civilisation.'[8] Identity politics were similarly undermined with the abolition of anti-racist bastions such as the GLC in 1986 while local government initiatives which briefly focused attention on employment and equal opportunities lost funding in the 1990s.[9]

Where does this discussion leave us in terms of thinking about the relationship between politics, social identities and the language of 'ordinariness'? What the M-O material demonstrates is that working class people claimed ordinariness as a means of refusing a pathologized identity & a privileged position. We see virtually the same process repeated when race is discussed: 'white' people often situate themselves as an ordinary, authentic group who have somehow been taken advantage of by both an out of touch establishment and minority groups claiming rights and privileges.

In a recent intervention Lawrence & Sutcliffe Braithwaite, argue that Thatcher transformed established political language of class through her rhetoric of ordinariness.[10] This appeal to 'ordinary families' and individuals sought to deny the salience of class altogether.

Much the foregoing would suggest that Thatcher's appeal to and cultivation of 'ordinariness' (which was normally combined with an attack on 'socialism') was politically astute: she was using a language, (or at least a word) which people used to understand themselves. However, I want to suggest that the political implications of this are not obvious. The M-O material suggests that Thatcher's *disavowal* of class through *her* rhetoric of ordinariness did NOT wash with people who used ordinariness to assert their working classness. Where Thatcher's appeal to ordinariness *may* have resonated more strongly is through her conflation of 'ordinariness' with 'whiteness.' However, while all seemed to blame Labour for the 'problem' of multiculturalism, this did not necessarily translate into support for the Conservatives. To illustrate this, I'd like to end with a quote from our Powellite asked to reflect on the coming general election in 1987:

> The extreme left of the labour party has lost my vote to labour. I cannot reconcile the Labour party's pandering to immigrants and homosexual minority groups with the well being of the country. I just cannot abide Mrs Thatcher or Mr Tebbitt and I believe that the Conservative party is dividing the country into the haves and the have nots And I *do not feel*, though I am probably materially better off now than I have ever been, that there is any set of circumstances that would persuade me to vote Conservative. My vote will go to the SDP/Liberal Alliance.' **B1426 M 55**

Clearly there are opportunities to explore the 'politics of ordinariness' by bringing Mass-observation responses into dialogue with other cultural and political material & much more work needs to be done here to explore the intersections and dis-connections which may result. What does seem clear is that between the 1960s and the 1980s *the language of ordinariness* was central *both* to attempts to maintain working class identities "from below" *and* to political efforts to destroy them "from above".

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[1] Mike Savage, 'Working class identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', Sociology, 39: 5, (2005), p. 938; Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*, (Oxford, 2010), pp. 216-221.
[2] Ben Jones, *The Working Class in Mid-Twentieth Century England: Community, Identity and Social Memory* (Manchester, 2012), pp. 57-8.

[3] Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Post-colonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013). I am grateful to Dr Schofield allowing me pre-publication access to this work & for numerous helpful suggestions in the course of writing this paper.

[4] Amy Whipple, 'Revisiting the "Rivers of Blood" Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell', *Journal of British Studies*, 48, (2009), p. 734.

[5] Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who needs identity?', S Hall & P. du Gay (eds), *Questions of Cultural Identity*, (London, 1996), pp. 2-3.

[6] David Feldman, 'Why the English like turbans: multicultural politics in British history', D. Feldman & J. Lawrence (eds), *Structures and Transformations in British History* (Cambridge, 2011). P. 298.

[7] Camilla Schofield, 'Enoch Powell and Thatcherism', B. Jackson & Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2011), p. 106.

[8] Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, (London, 1987), p. 59.

[9] Floya Anthias & Nira Yuval Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Colour, Gender, Class and the Anti-racist Struggle* (London, 1992), p. 169.

[10] Jon Lawrence & Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 'Margaret Thatcher & the decline of class politics', B. Jackson & Robert Saunders (eds), *Making Thatcher's Britain* (Cambridge, 2011).