

## **Classificatory struggles in the midst of austerity: policing or politics?**

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## Classificatory Struggles in the Midst of Austerity: Policing or Politics?

### Abstract

This article reports findings on class identities amongst a small sample of mainly working-class residents in the City of Salford. We attempt to develop a Rancièrian framework for understanding class identities, centred on his key concept of *dissensus*, and how these ideas have been developed by Tyler (2013; 2015) through the notion of 'classificatory struggles'. From this, we identify a continuum of responses that are discernible in relation to the neoliberal order of classifications; from those orientated to a 'policing' function, either accepting and internalising dominant discourses or attempting to displace abjection onto others; to those that tend more towards 'politics' in either asserting alternative circuits of value or through an appeal to the name of the proletariat as political claim to radical equality. In examining our data, we note that although a majority disavowed an explicit working-class identity, they nonetheless engaged in a range of classificatory struggles.

**Key words:** Class identities; Rancièrè; dissensus; classificatory struggles; dis-identification;

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### Introduction

This article explores class identities amongst a small sample of mainly working-class residents in the City of Salford. Taking Skeggs's (2011) critique of Bourdieu as our point of departure, namely that the latter's understanding of class represents a deficit model, we seek to develop a Rancièrian framework for understanding class identities, centred on his key concept of *dissensus*. We describe some of the key features of Rancièrè's (1999) theoretical contributions, particularly the politics/police duality and the staging of disputes through 'subjectification'. We then explore how these ideas have been developed by Tyler (2013; 2015) through the notion of 'classificatory struggles'

and applied to the empirical context of neoliberal Britain. Tyler shows how 'classificatory struggle-from-above' has woven together older narratives of so-called 'cultures of poverty' with a neoliberal discourse of inclusion through work, instituting a 'disgust consensus' mobilised through the production of 'national objects'.

Although Tyler has done much to develop and extend a Rancièrian framework, we argue that the concept of 'classificatory struggle' might also be seen to operate at too general a level of abstraction. Our contention is that not all forms of disagreement, disidentification and classificatory struggle signify active and progressive resistance to the neoliberal production of class names. In seeking to differentiate between various forms of classificatory struggle, we identify a continuum of responses that are discernible in relation to the neoliberal order of classifications; from those orientated to a 'policing' function, either accepting and internalising dominant discourses or attempting to displace abjection onto others; to those that tend more towards 'politics' in either asserting alternative circuits of value or through an appeal to 'the name of the proletariat' as a political claim to radical equality.

We then briefly outline the local context of Salford, exploring the fluctuations in the coherence of class identities over the last century, as well as outlining the methods used in this study. This is followed by the presentation of our interview data, structured around three key lines of questioning; where people see themselves in terms of social class, perceptions of societal fairness and understandings of the popular perceptions of welfare claimants. What our findings ultimately show is that while a majority our sample disavowed a working-class identity and some expressed a combination of shameful identification and disidentification premised on the displacement of abjection on to *others*, a significant number responded in ways that entailed our more political forms of classificatory struggle. That this was particularly the case amongst those who claimed a working-class identity demonstrates the continued significance of 'the name of the proletariat' as an operator of conflict.

## Police, Politics and Classificatory Struggles

In the last two decades there has been a resurgence of interest in the concept of class amongst British sociologists, from both Bourdieusian and Rancièrian perspectives. Employing Bourdieu's framework of competition amongst, and reproduction by, actors on the basis of their possession of diverse forms of capital and a *habitus* shaped by their social conditioning, the works of sociologists such as Savage (2000) and Atkinson (2010) have been enormously productive and influential. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's understanding of class has recently been critiqued as a 'deficit model' unable to account for the formation of a valued personhood 'who *cannot* access the fields of exchange to convert, accrue or generate value for themselves' (Skeggs, 2011: 502). Increasing interest has been shown in Rancièrian approaches, which centre on Rancièrè's claim that class is fundamentally a contestation over classifications (Tyler, 2013; 2015; Blackshaw, 2016). Reflecting on this debate, in this section we attempt to develop a Rancièrian framework for understanding class identities, centred on his key concepts of police, politics and *dissensus*, exploring how these ideas have been developed by Tyler (2013; 2015) through the notion of 'classificatory struggles'. We then outline a continuum of four responses that are discernible in relation to the production of class objects.

At their heart, political struggles are identity struggles waged between the excluded and unrecognised and those who govern the current assignation of functions, status and rank (Pirsoul, 2017: 249). For Rancièrè what distinguishes politics from other ways of ordering society is the complete equality of all speaking beings. Without equality, distributions, functions and discourses become the antithesis of politics – they become 'the police'. Here 'the police' is both the social order and its legitimation, established through a consensus as to the irrefutable nature of the current ordering. Thus, consensus is essentially a process of *de-politicisation* allowing the police to manage societal division and exclusion. It is everything that we would associate with politics understood in the dominant sense: 'procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organisation of powers, the distribution of places and roles' (Rancièrè, 1999: 28).

In opposition to this, politics, in Rancière's sense, is fundamentally *dissensus*, a rupture from this established order, a setting-up or a staging (Ibid: 51) of a dispute by those who are included in the social order only by virtue of their exclusion. Consciousness is therefore a prerequisite of politics, identifiable in a process Rancière terms 'subjectification': 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience' (Ibid: 35). Crucially, this subjectification is always a disidentification (Ibid: 36), an attempt to demonstrate equality and destabilise the meanings that fix the dominated in place. Politics therefore is fundamentally linked to accounts that are made of speech. Politics is the power of the unrecognised. It is in this way that politics becomes class struggle and the struggle 'defines itself as the re-symbolisation of the community' (Blechman et al, 2005: 286).

This process of subjectification is fundamental to a person's political development and for Rancière (2003) helps distinguish his approach to that of Bourdieu. Bourdieu, he claims, assumes a radical immutability in the nature of inequality, whereby the poor are forever cut off from the means with which to interpret their own situation. The working-class simply do not have the *leisure* to develop themselves in ways that transgress supposedly incontrovertible class boundaries. Blackshaw (2016) suggests much of contemporary British sociology is similarly pervaded by a view of the working-class as having 'no social role other than to perform the inequality they endure' (Ibid: 17). Blackshaw argues that this fails to recognise that the working-class 'actually inhabit pluralized worlds where there are different possibilities' (Ibid: 33) and instead one-dimensionally represents them as either hapless victims (locked into poverty), monsters (accepting demonising caricatures of the working-class as representative of the whole) or pets (domesticated bearers of some virtue held at a comfortable distance from the analyst).

A critique of Rancière is arguably the level of abstraction at which his framework is pitched. Fortunately, Imogen Tyler (2013; 2015) has recently done much to interpret Rancière's work and to apply it to the empirical context of neoliberal Britain. Tyler describes the neoliberal refashioning of

social class in Britain as the fabrication of 'Blair's poor' (2013: 176), to underscore the novelty of a particular form of underclass discourse, which retained the emphasis on the 'cultures of poverty' of earlier articulations, but wove this together under New Labour with a new emphasis on work - or rather worklessness (Ibid: 198) - as *the* measure of inclusion/exclusion. This discourse chimed with the intensifying denigration of the working-classes at the turn of the millennium, instituted through a 'disgust consensus', testified to by the proliferating cultural production of 'national objects' (Tyler, 2013), most notably the figure of the tasteless, excessive 'chav' (Tyler, 2008).

Developing her own theoretical framework, Tyler explores how in Rancière's historical analysis of working-class writers engaged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century labour movement, class struggle can be seen as 'a working-class counter-offensive against the imposition of names and the destinies they prescribed, rather than an authentic "culture"' (2013: 172). In later work Tyler further develops these insights into the notion of 'classificatory struggles', arguing that it is the 'exposing and critiquing of the consequences of classificatory systems' (2015: 507), which should be a central focus of a reconfigured sociology of class. That there has been an increase in the intensity of classificatory struggle-from-above seems in little doubt (Tyler, 2013; Jensen and Tyler, 2015), yet Tyler is keen to demonstrate that this has not been uncontested (2015: 495) as the imposition of names is met by *dissensus*, resistance.

And yet 'classificatory struggle' may also be thought to operate at too general a level of abstraction. Are all forms of disagreement, disidentification and classificatory struggle signifiers of active and progressive (in Rancière's sense of the equality of all speaking beings) resistance to the neoliberal production of class names? Attempting to integrate Tyler's contributions with those of other authors and referring back to Rancière, we would argue not. Instead, we identify a continuum of four responses that are discernible in relation to the production of objects associated with neoliberal class strategy; from those orientated to a 'policing' function to those that tend more towards 'politics'. The first response does not entail classificatory struggle, whereas the latter three

do (see table 1). Our project here is analogous to Reay's mapping of a psychic landscape of class (2005: 913-914), though our focus is on the presence (or absence) and form of classificatory struggle rather than the emotional dimensions of class. Whilst our distinctions are useful schematically, we recognise that the same actors may articulate a variety of responses, and all disidentification entails some measure of resistance even while more 'political' responses may be subsumed back into the 'policing' function.

### **TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

To elaborate our proposed typology, the first potential response we perceive in relation to attempts to impose classification is one of identification - the absence of classificatory struggle. Here actors both accept the stigmatising discourses that circulate in relation to class ('classificatory struggle-from-above') *and* understand themselves as belonging to such a class (they accept the police order). Such a response is productive of the feelings of shame that are evident in the entire canon of research on the affective dimensions of class, from Sennett and Cobb (1972) to all those studies animated by Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Reay, 2005).

In the second type of response and the first form of classificatory struggle, denigrating classifications may be accepted, but there is either a disidentification from belonging to a particular maligned class, or a projection of denigrating classifications on to an *other*. In Rancière's terms these responses accept the police's construction and legitimation of the social order, but assert that the police order's names have been incorrectly applied to themselves. Examples of such disidentification are evident in work of Skeggs (1997) and Savage (2000), as well as amongst Shildrick and MacDonald's (2013) sample, who were liable to 'blame the poor' for *their* own situation but articulate their own distinctiveness from the maligned category.

Turning to examples of racialised projection, Mäkinen, applying Tyler's framework, explores the ways in which the neoliberal redefinition of citizenship in relation to work and

entrepreneurialism has recast unemployment as a personal and moral problem (2017: 220). The contradictions and forms of resentment this produces become misdirected at migrant others as 'a twisted or displaced class struggle, in which the class relations imposed by the neoliberal regime, rather than being questioned, are taken for granted and racialized' (2017: 231). In this way class struggle is transformed into a question of belonging. Krivonos (2018) explores the same process in her work on how ethnic Russians in Finland disassociate from neoliberal conceptions of failure through the racialisation of others, whom they disidentify from through a staging of their own *whiteness*. As Krivonos argues, this is an attempt 'to produce whiteness as a struggle for recognition and for the generation of personhood with alternative value' (2018: 1156).

By contrast, in our first form of more 'political' response and second form of classificatory struggle, we are interested in the positing of alternative circuits of value that are less premised on the projection of abjection. Skeggs (2011) explores the formation of value by people with the *wrong* capitals in terms of practices of mutual care, the gift of attention over time, and attacks on snobbery and pretentiousness (Ibid: 504-506). This idea of alternative circuits of value suffuses the work of McKenzie (2012), who explores how practices of mothering, length of association with and defence of the neighbourhood, all constitute forms of belonging that serve, in part, to insulate residents from stigmatising associations imposed from without (Ibid: 473). Paton refers to similar processes as a 'neighbourhood nationalism' that is not ethnically bound (2014: 94). In some instances, such alternative circuits of value clearly constitute part of what Hagedorn has termed 'resistance identities', whereby religious, ethnic, racialised (2008: 60) and territorial identities are forged to offer protection against the uncertainties and injustices of the contemporary world. While these strategies of disidentification may entail claims for equality, clearly there is also the potential for them to fall back into policing inasmuch as they may be implicated in the previous mode (disidentification on the basis of essentialised othering).



The final response, we term classificatory struggle 'through appeal to the name of the proletariat'. In Rancière's thought the 'undifferentiated mass' refers to the naming of a class who are 'without qualities', but whose only quality are the fact that they are simply 'like the rest' (1999: 8-9), thus signifying the equality of all speaking beings. In different epochs, different names are applied to this 'undifferentiated mass' that serve to crystallise the staging of a disagreement over classification:

In the political sense, a *class* is something else entirely: an operator of conflict, a name for counting the uncounted, a mode of subjectification superimposed upon the reality of all social groups. The Athenian demos or the proletariat, [...] are classes of this kind, that is, forces for declassifying social species [...]. (Rancière, 1999: 83-84)

Therefore, class names reveal the antagonisms that the police order seeks to repress, as well as serving as rallying points in the (classificatory) struggles for equality. A contemporary example offered by Tyler of (2015: 495) is the unfurling of a 'Fuck Benefits Street' banner by Middlesbrough FC supporters group 'Red Faction', who might be thought to be bearers of the vestiges of the highly solidaristic class cultures generated by membership of tightly-bound occupational communities (MacKenzie et al, 2006; Reay, 2005).

And yet we must be conscious of the propensity of the name of the proletariat to degenerate into forms of 'police-Marxism', whereby the theorist sets themselves up as the interpreter of a radical disjuncture between form and content (Rancière, 1999), the latter of which is only accessible to themselves (a criticism Rancière levels at both Marx and Bourdieu in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, 2003). The name of the proletariat can also be deployed in such a fashion as to exclude certain categories, such as the *lumpenproletariat* (Tyler, 2013: 186) or women, for whom working-class identities cannot offer the 'strategic and positive identifications' (Tyler, 2013: 172; Skeggs, 1997) that they offer to men.

In the next section we will outline the local context of our research and the methods used in this study. Following that, we attempt to explore our qualitative data with a focus on the four

responses we have identified above, to test the utility of our differentiated reading of classificatory struggle.

### **Local Context and Methods**

In many ways Salford is *the* archetypal 'working-class city'; from its inception as the 'one large working-men's quarter' described by Engels (1844: 62), the birthplace (alongside Manchester) of the Trades Union Congress in 1868, home to some of the most prominent chartists, suffragettes and fighters of the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War, the 'classic slum' of Robert Roberts (1990), and the 'dirty old town' romanticised in the songs of Ewan McColl and the paintings of L S Lowry. These images persisted well into the twentieth century through the 'kitchen sink' realism of Shelagh Delaney and later Mike Leigh, as well as the music of The Smiths and the 'punk poetry' of John Cooper Clarke.

Nevertheless, while Salford was always a working-class city, this does not mean that an explicit class consciousness of a Marxist or even Labourist variety has always been dominant. Although organised labour was a feature of the city from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, popular Conservatism was a significant force in the city until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, largely fuelled by sectarian religious hostility levelled at the large Irish Catholic community (Greenall, 1974). Indeed, the period in which the Labour Party locally was a mass movement *of* the people lasted only a few short decades, after which slum clearance and redevelopment destroyed informal community networks, party organisation collapsed, and fractures emerged between the Labourist traditionals and the New Left (dominant in Salford and Manchester, respectively - Fielding and Tanner, 2006).

This period, the 1960s and 70s, coincided with the cataclysmic de-industrialisation of Salford, the closure of Salford docks, rapidly escalating levels of unemployment and urban flight that hollowed out the inner-city neighbourhoods. This led to an 'entrepreneurial turn' by the city's Labour council from the 1980s onwards that conceived of urban regeneration primarily in terms of securing inward investment. This was understood as an attempt to 'refashion the class geography'

(Henderson et al., 2007: 1451) of the city by attracting in the so-called 'creative classes'; a process that involved the very public rejection of the city's working-class connotations (Beard, 2011).

Nonetheless, despite class fragmentation, urban restructuring and more-or-less official attempts at erasure, we can point to evidence for the continued salience of class as an identity in Salford, albeit lacking in the coherence that was achieved for that brief period in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Class conflict and classificatory struggles have been identified in the contestation of gentrification of central Salford (Evans et al, 1996; Jeffery, 2018) and the existence of a diffused 'resistance identity' (Hagedorn, 2008) was certainly evident in the motivations of the most marginalised sections of the local working-class youth who participated in the Pendleton Riot of 2011 (Jeffery and Tufail, 2015).

The findings presented below explore the extent and nature of classificatory struggles in contemporary Salford. That data was collected during a small-scale qualitative research project exploring precarious work and punitive welfare reform conducted in two neighbourhoods in Salford during the first six months of 2014. One of these neighbourhoods was in east Salford (adjacent to Manchester city-centre) while the other was in one of the subsidiary towns further to the west. Participants were selected theoretically because they were either unemployed at the time of the interview, had prior experience of unemployment, or were currently undertaking low paid work, and opportunistically because they were known to one of the authors or had some association with a community centre in each neighbourhood that helped serve as gatekeepers. Of the 35 interviews conducted for the project a sub-sample of 24 - who were specifically asked questions related to class identities - is utilised for the purposes of this article. The three lines of questioning upon which this article is centred were: 'where do you see yourself in terms of social class'; 'do you think Britain is fair in terms of access to employment/or in other ways?'; 'what do you think the popular perceptions of people claiming benefits are/are these representations are fair?'

The project was funded by a small grant from the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam University, through whom ethics clearance was also granted. All participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms and certain spatial identifiers have been removed. We now turn to an analysis of our data, presented sequentially in relation to the three lines of questioning.

### **Class Identity**

Only one quarter our sample invoked the label 'working-class' in response to the direct question on class identity. However, answers were not always straightforward and some of those who initially disclaimed a working-class identity nonetheless went on to express one of our forms of classificatory struggle.

### **TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE**

The first group who dis-identified from being working-class were explicit in expressing a sense of shame based on an understanding of the ways in which they were denigrated through classification (Sennett and Cobb, 1972). For example, *Amy* (35, stay-at-home mum) says she doesn't think of herself as belonging to a social class, but then qualifies this: 'It depends, if it's a financial thing that puts you in a social class, then, possibly, yes, but not for any other reason. Not like intellectually in a certain class, but, financially, yes, I would say so'. Perhaps the most explicit revelation of the hidden injuries of class came from *Jack*, a 43-year-old hospital porter, whose response gave the fullest articulation of the affective consequences of understanding oneself to being positioned 'lower class':

*Jack*: It doesn't mean anything. [...] If I start putting myself in a bracket of lower class, it starts getting me depressed, thinking, "I'm lower class."

Interviewer: To what extent do you see yourself defined by the job that you do?

*Jack*: Again, I'm not bothered. I do think, because I push bins around the hospital, I have thought at times about, that person's looking at me thinking I smell and I'm lower class, I'm lower than them, because I push the bins, but, again, I don't think about it. To me, I'm doing my best, I've got a job, a lot of people haven't got a job, a lot of fathers don't look after their

kids, they won't pay for them, I'm doing what I can. I'm not bothered what people say or what they think.

The affective strains felt by many of our participants are a result of their symbolic positioning, yet are also a reflection of the material conditions in which they find themselves (explored in more detail in Jeffery et al, 2018).

The remainder of those who disidentified from a class identity, and by far the most numerous, were those who articulated a discourse of 'ordinariness'. This included *Megan* (19), *Harriet* (67, retired) and *Alec* (43), who was unemployed and suffering long-term ill-health: 'no, I belong to my class me [...] I don't belong to any class, I'm just one of these that likes to get on with things'. Likewise, *Jamie*, a 24-year-old chef and former offender, claimed: 'I don't believe in all that class stuff, working-class, business class and all that stupid stuff. A person is a person [...]'.

In these cases we can detect the first form of classificatory struggle, a denial that dominant classifications personally applied. Yet we would argue that class identities nonetheless served as a reminder of the structural inequalities that were admitted elsewhere in *Jamie's* interview, as when he argues that neighbourhood 'regeneration' is 'building all these nice houses [...] that no one who lives there can afford'. Indeed, most of the disidentifications from class we encountered entailed the assertion of alternative value circuits (the second form of classificatory struggle) premised upon geography (as in Paton's 'neighbourhood nationalism'): *Reggie* (48, unemployed) describing himself as 'a Salford boy' and *Joe's* (57, unemployed) references to the north/south divide ('anywhere from, say, the Midlands downwards, they haven't got a clue').

Turning to those who identified as working-class, the most common narratives were linked to their need to work, their life-histories, class pride, and a sense of struggle. *Emma* (67) for example stated: 'I've always worked. My husband worked [...]'. *Alice*, a 50-year-old community worker who had overcome heroin dependency elaborated:

*Alice*: I'm working-class.

Interviewer: What does being working-class mean to you?

*Alice*: Working-class means to me like really – it's trudging through mud sometimes, being working-class, unless you educate yourself. [...] Working-class means for me sometime being below the poverty line or on the poverty line, even if you've got a well-paid – well it's not well paid now anyway, it's not. The cost of living is just so high.

While the focus on work as constitutive of being working-class could be understood in a police sense of conforming to neoliberal subjectification (Tyler, 2013) in *Alice's* articulation there is a clear sense of injustice (not being paid enough).

Whereas *Emma* and *Alice* talked about struggling to get by, several participants were explicit in articulating the most political form of classificatory struggle. *Zoe* (46), a care assistant on a zero-hours contract, who had gained a degree in the social sciences as a mature student having left school with no qualifications, was keen to demonstrate a familiarity with sociological concepts: 'Well, there is a kind of a class war, but it doesn't help with what the media is portraying with benefit scroungers. I definitely believe the government has created a divide within the working-class and the lumpen-proletariat'. *Peter*, 49 years old and currently unemployed, echoed these thoughts: '[...] you've got them at the top dumping on the commoners. It's never been any different'.

Yet the most striking account was offered by *Charlie*, a 48-year-old youth worker who had spent a great deal of his younger life in prison. Firstly, he declares himself to be working-class 'and proud of it', before specifying that he is a member of the 'fighting class', who can't just 'climb out the bucket and fuck off somewhere, to Mauritius or wherever else'. He also links this to the commitment of his parents to earning a living, the fact that he speaks the same language as 'the kids' that he works with, and that 'I'm not some snobby cunt turning up on the doorstep going, "I've just done a course at university and I'm here to help you"'. Here the resistance to the pretensions of middle-class cultural capital is palpable. What is also common to the responses of *Zoe*, *Peter* and *Charlie* is an awareness of a more explicitly political solidaristic working-class culture (see Reay, 2005), even though *Zoe* is unusual in that her higher levels of cultural capital afford her a level of fluency in mobilising established class discourses that was not found amongst the other participants. She was

also unusual in being a woman who freely articulated a working-class identity (cf. Skeggs, 1997; Tyler, 2013: 172).

While this first question around class identities has revealed the both types of policing responses - the familiar themes of ordinariness, ambivalence, shame and dis-identification that the work of Savage (2000) and Skeggs (1997) would lead us to expect - it has also revealed a significant proportion of more political responses, alternative value circuits couched in geography and an awareness of inequality and injustice linked to the remnants of a solidaristic working-class identity.

### **Perceptions of Employment Opportunities/Societal Fairness**

While participants may have been ambivalent in terms of class identities, this was much less the case in relation to their responses to the questions on fairness in relation to employment opportunities/societal fairness (as shown in table 3). Firstly, very few participants claimed society was fair. Those that did tended to emphasise the police narrative of meritocratic individualism and project stigma onto others. The first group that referenced societal injustice articulated perceptions that 'immigrants'/ethnic minorities receive favourable treatment in relation to the white working-class and thus can be seen to be engaging in the first form of classificatory struggle. Nonetheless, the majority of participants engaged in more political forms of classificatory struggle, critiquing government policies and articulating explicit understandings of class conflict and (in one case) gender inequalities.

### **TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE**

Only four participants claimed society is fair. *Shell*, a care home manager, drew on her own experience of social mobility as someone who left school with 'five O-Levels' and is now a 'registered manager of the company'. Here we can see the importance of *trajectory* (Atkinson, 2010) in shaping

values when she articulates a narrative of meritocratic individualism: 'It's the effort; it's like anything, you've got to put in to get out. We can't live in this society where we're just all going to sit back and let other people look after us'. *Lauren* (19) took a firmer line on this, referencing discourses on the poor as those who are lazy and do not want to work. *Peter* was more ambivalent, noting that 'people will take a chance on someone if they show the right commitment', but also observing that the Job Centre tended to funnel people towards menial low paid jobs, arguing against the forced labour represented by workfare and bemoaning government cuts to local services.

By contrast, the first group who acknowledged social injustice articulated a set of responses that exhibit the form of disidentification premised on the projection of abjection onto others, with participants stating that they perceived 'immigrants' and/or ethnic minorities receiving preferential treatment (cf. Mäkinen, 2017; Krivosos, 2018). Though this was the explicit answer for only two participants, it was also mentioned by several others.

*Reggie*: The ethnics get more opportunities, not being racist. [...] They've just built all brand-new houses up [there] and you're not allowed to bid for them, they're being offered to the ethnic minorities. Four bedroom houses, big gardens, and there are girls and families out there who need new houses with gardens but they can't, because why? They are not of ethnic minority. How is that fair?

*Alec* meanwhile explained how increasing competition for jobs and housing was pushing him towards the UK Independence Party, although he's 'not into racism'. Ultimately, we would argue that these discourses need to be seen as in part representing legitimate fears concerning increasingly scarce access to jobs, homes and security, but fears that have been shaped by wider societal discourses around immigration. More particularly, we would be at pains to stress the role of mainstream politicians in stoking these fears. Hazel Blears for instance, Member of Parliament for Salford (1997-2015) continually made speeches regarding social tensions emanating from rising



immigration in Salford (Carlin, 2007; Rickman, 2011). The comments of some of our participants need to be read in this context.

And yet by far the most numerous set of responses engaged in more explicitly political forms of classificatory struggles by identifying issues of inequality and specific government policies, particularly around austerity, as a key component of societal injustice. This was allied to references to the difficult labour market, which appeared across a wide range of interviews (see Jeffery et al, 2018). Several participants were particularly vexed in relation to the welfare reforms introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government since 2010 (see Cooper and Whyte, 2017). *Emma* identified the increasingly stringent regime of conditionality around benefits (including 'sanctions') as an example of how society was unfair ('they're just making it very difficult for everybody'), and in the following extract *Kevin* refers to the 'Bedroom Tax':

It's just another way of clawing back money. [...] cutting this, cutting that, we'll take that off them, suspend you from [...] job seekers for this reason or for that reason. I just think they're just out to just cripple everybody, aren't they? [...] I think at the minute [the government is] obviously run by middle-class people who have a low opinion of people like us.

*Mikey* (48 unemployed) articulated a strikingly similar refrain, blaming the 'millionaires' in government for 'stamping [their] fucking big fat arse feet in the working-class again'. Here there is a very clear sense of the discourse of class as an 'operator of conflict' (Rancière, 1999: 83; Tyler, 2013), the belief that policies are being made by people who did not understand the lives of Salfordians, and a sense of the unequal and unjust distribution of opportunities:

[...] if you have got the chance in the first place then the government will give you a chance. If you have got nothing you are not even looked at, you are forgotten about, you are lost in the system [...], you don't deserve to be thought of, you don't deserve to be helped or anything like that. (*Jamie*, 24)

Asking *Jamie* if he thought some places got a worse deal than others he responded 'yes, inner-city areas'. He then started saying that there is 'no money going into the community', before correcting himself by referring to the selective impact of gentrification in the city (see Jeffery, 2018). Finally, *Mikey* also referred to increasing crime rates locally, which led onto a complex discussion of various

government policies, including the tripling of tuition fees ('my brother [sent] both his kids to uni on three grand. But now there is no chance'), but also how local working-class resentment was being directed towards students (perceived to be middle-class):

We have had poor bloody students man, you know. I mean who hits a student? You're not hard if you hit a student. You're a shitbag. I always tell them, "It's wrong, if you are going to rob someone, go rob a bank man, go and rob some company. Don't be taking it out on other people". The kids from uni, all they are trying to do is better their life, but their lives [local youths] are so non-optional, it annoys them and they think, "Well why can't I do that?"

These tensions are reminiscent of the pitting against each of the (class) figures of the benefits scrounger and 'hipster' described by Tyler (2015: 506).

Finally, *Katie*, a 38-year-old social worker and single mother, engaged in classificatory struggle on the basis of gender, rather than class. In response to the initial question she recognised the role of an 'establishment' in making society unfair, but further elaborated, 'especially for women', making extended references to the 'glass ceiling'. She was particularly scathing about the way in which single-mothers are characterised by the wider society:

[...] we're a burden to society, that we're taking from [the] public purse, that we're not giving anything back, that we're not raising our children, that we're promiscuous. It's everything, isn't it? [...] what they need to remember is it's single women that fucking run this society; we do a damn fucking good job of it. A damn good job.

In this section, we have seen that most participants felt contemporary society to be 'unfair', and this extended well beyond the minority who claimed working-class identity. In our sample, we found little evidence of the dominant ideology of meritocratic individualism (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013). A *majority* linked their answers to issues of economic inequality, government programmes of austerity or explicit class conflict.

### **Perceptions of Benefits Claimants**

In the final line of questioning we asked participants what they thought the 'popular' perceptions of the unemployed and/or benefits claimants were and whether they thought these were 'fair' (see table 3). Tyler contends these perceptions articulate:

[...] a 'disgust consensus', through which ideological beliefs (the underclass), economic interests (the erosion of the welfare state) and a series of governmental technologies (media, politics, policy, law) converge to mystify neoliberal Governmentality by naturalising poverty in ways that legitimise the social abjection of the most socially and economically disadvantaged citizens within the state. (2013: 170-171)

But what is striking here is that most participants rejected the stigmatising discourses perpetuated by the mass media (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) and which seemingly held such purchase for the sample of low income individuals interviewed by Shildrick and MacDonald (2013). We will examine the nature of these rejections below, but we begin with the responses that reflected identification (rather than disidentification) with and projection of the dominant narrative, that pathologising perceptions of the unemployed and benefits claimants were indeed fair and factually based.

### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

*Harriet* (67) and *Lucy* (45) both endorsed neoliberal policing narratives in relation to benefits claimants. In doing so *Lucy* articulated a view of the unemployed as lazy and of the benefits regime as one that provided for an 'easy life' (as opposed to a minimal level of subsistence): 'I don't think they're made to go looking for jobs sometimes. I know that sounds awful, but I think they make it easy for them to stay at home. When you hear what they're on, I wouldn't go to work. [...] I could stay at home'. *Lucy* went on to underscore her point by concluding that the government should 'make it harder for them to be able to claim'. *Harriet's* response was similar, favourably comparing her daughter's hard effort to the laziness of near neighbours (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2013: 293-294 for perspectives formed from a close point of comparison).

Turning then to those who expressed ambivalence as to whether popular perceptions of benefits claimants were fair, here we see a combination of condemnatory remarks, mixed with qualification, and acknowledgement of the sources of stigmatisation. These responses incorporate elements of both policing and political responses. For instance, *Shell* stated that while benefits claimants being 'lazy' is a popular perception she didn't think this was a fair representation. When questioned as to where she thought such perceptions came from, she responded in the same way as

a majority of the sample, by referring to the influence of the media: 'people believe what they see on the TV, don't they?' *Jamie* (24) and *Billy* (31) also argued that media representations were largely unfair, despite them acknowledging that some played the system. In *Billy's* words, there may be part of the population who '[...] are just taking the piss [...] but there is part of the population that are looking for work, so they are making that part of the population look bad when it's not like that'. In these instances, we can grasp a sense of defensiveness linked to identification with dominant discourses (type 1 responses) that may in part be a consequence of the heightened cultural offensives to which the working-class have been subject (Jensen and Tyler, 2015).

The final group of participants were much more explicit in their rejection of the stigmatising discourses around poverty, ranging from those who focused upon the 'fairness' of these representations to those who answered in more explicitly class-conscious terms, identifying the government and/or opposing classes as responsible for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. As an example of the former, *Amy*, who dis-identified from the working-class and 'didn't know' in relation to the question on societal fairness, argued that the perceptions of benefits claimants were unfair 'in the majority of cases' and went on to explain a preference for claiming benefits to avoid the 'poverty trap' whereby loss of benefits outweighed gains from low-paid, part-time work. *Emma* meanwhile argued that people were only claiming benefits because they have 'no choice', pointing to the lack of available jobs in the city and the fact that many older people could not find work either because of age discrimination or ill-health and disability (see also Jeffery et al, 2018).

Within this final group we also see the most politicised rejections of the dominant discourses on benefits claimants, a significant number identifying these stigmatising representations as 'propaganda':

*Jack*: If you're a worker, you look at people who are unemployed and, not through your own fault, and I blame this on the government, as dirt. The government have drilled it in to everybody's head over the past few years that you should get a job, everyone on the dole's a scrounger.

*Kevin*: I think through the powers of television and stuff like that, [...] I think the perceptions are quite bad, that everybody is at the Jobcentre or everybody is not working, they're spitting out babies to fund their lifestyle [...] it's the perception of the government as well and the way they're looking down on people.

*Mikey*: [...] the media, as usual, really, really, really stamp on their head. I mean they are *the tool of the pinstripe terrorist*. [...] The whole scroungers thing. So then that turns the people who have got the jobs against the people with not the jobs. Programmes like Jeremy Kyle, absolutely destroy people for not having jobs, [...] So they are very good at turning the people against the people, and they did that in the miners' strike as well. [...] They wouldn't have had scabs otherwise.

Further examples of this kind of analysis were put forward by *Peter*, who talked at length about the injustices of the benefits system, the influence of the media, and the way that poverty had been exacerbated by government decisions, *Zoe*, who argued that the government had created 'a divide within the working-class' and *Alec*, who asserted that the 'Tories' do not understand what it is like to struggle to get by and that it was 'the rich who voted them in in the first place'. What the foregoing illustrates is a significant degree of rejection of the neoliberal policing narratives concerning the unemployed and benefits claimants. Most of the sample clearly identified these representations as *externally generated* and a large number associated this with the machinations of the government and/or other classes<sup>1</sup>.

To differing degrees our participants engaged in 'classificatory struggles' regarding their perceived positioning by others. By way of a conclusion we attempt to tie together our findings from the three areas of questioning, weigh up the balance of police and political responses to the established narratives of neoliberalism and to try to make sense of them in terms of the current conjuncture.

## **Conclusion**

What we have demonstrated in this study is that while a majority our sample disavowed a working-class identity (Skeggs, 1997) and some articulated a combination of shameful identification (revealing the power of neoliberal stigmatising offensives) and disidentification premised on the displacement of abjection on to *others*, a significant proportion responded in ways that entailed our

more political forms of classificatory struggle. Often this was premised on the construction of alternative circuits of value, from place-based identities to a differentiation of themselves from the condescending or extravagant practices of those they perceived to be positioned above them. Nevertheless, it was amongst those who avowed a working-class identity, invoking class language as 'the name of the proletariat', who articulated a sense of injustice most clearly in terms of structural factors: the necessity of work, life as struggle ('trudging through mud', being part of the 'fighting class') and class conflict. Though we note that this was an identity less strategically available to women.

In analysing responses to the second line of questioning, 'societal fairness' at a general level, small numbers did emphasise the police narrative of meritocratic individualism and project stigma onto others, either blaming 'the poor' for their own condition or articulating resentment at migrants in relation to competition over jobs and housing. Yet most participants thought society to be unfair in various ways, the dominant responses referencing discourses of societal (in)justice in the forms of difficult labour markets, inequality between areas, and government policies of austerity and welfare reform that were identified in the more political forms of classificatory struggle (a government 'obviously run by middle-class', 'stamping' on the working-class). Most of those who either thought society to be fair or weren't sure were those who disavowed a working-class identity, and only one person who affirmed such an identity agreed that society was fair, again attesting to the continuing strength of the name of the proletariat as an operator of conflict and a claim for equality.

Finally, in response to the more specific question on perceptions of the unemployed and benefits claimants, only two thought these representations were fair, while six were more ambivalent. Interestingly, there was no overlap between these two kinds of responses and working-class identity. Those who identified as working-class unanimously condemned popular discourses on benefits claimants as unfair. This latter group exhibited a more solidaristic sense of class consciousness (Mackenzie et al, 2006) and constructed the source of negative perceptions as

propaganda perpetuated by 'the government', 'Tories', 'the rich and famous' and 'pinstripe terrorists'. Yet ultimately, most of our sample were willing and to varying degrees able to engage in classificatory struggles (Tyler, 2015), resisting the way *people like them* are constructed by the cultural offensives of class denigration.

At the same time, we would not want to overstate the extent to which these forms of classificatory struggle represent class consciousness as it has been traditionally understood. Not only were class identities defuse and resistance varying in coherence, but elsewhere we have described a significant degree of despair as a response to such processes as punitive welfare reform (Jeffery et al, 2018). Only two participants recorded current or past membership of a trade union and only a handful reported having ever engaged in any 'organised' political activism. Yet given that the significance of class has been systematically erased in the political discourse of the last few decades, that working-class institutions have withered away, and that, on a local level, the 'creative classes' have been constructed as the privileged agents of regeneration and growth, this is hardly surprising. Indeed, we would argue alongside Devine (1992) that the ambivalence of class identities is part and parcel of an inherently fractured and contested political terrain.

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Table 1: Typology of identification/disidentification

Types	Features	Policing or political	Classificatory struggle
Type 1:	Identification with dominant discourses	Policing	No
Type 2:	Disidentification/Projection of abjection	More policing	Yes
Type 3:	Alternative circuits of value	More political	Yes
Type 4:	The name of the proletariat	Political	Yes

Table 2: Class (Self-Identity)

Working-class	6
Middle-class	1
No Class Identity/ambivalent	17

Table 3: Is Society Fair in Terms of Employment Opportunities/In Other Ways?

Yes	4
No	17
Don't know/ambivalent	3

Table 4: Perceptions of Benefits Claimants

Depictions = unfair	15
Depictions = fair	3
Ambivalent	6

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<sup>i</sup> Indeed, *Zoe* was part of a 'combatting stigma' group formed at one of the community centres from which we recruited participants, which aimed at providing mutual support and articulating counternarratives to the neoliberal discourse of 'strivers and skivers'.