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ARTICLE



## Why we still need to talk about class

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### ABSTRACT

This article places the aim of the *Incubate Propagate* research network – to address the obstacles for artists outwith the graduate community to access theatre-making careers – in dialogue with some key and recurring concerns in contemporary debates around class identification in the twenty-first century. It argues that articulation of class discrimination and disadvantage in the field of theatre-making is critical, not despite the complexity of reaching contemporary definitions of class, but because that very complexity reveals precisely the extent of the problem and the specific, and often unconscious, ways in which discrimination is operating. The article extends the debate from an emphasis on economic capital to examine the critical importance of social and cultural capital to class identity, discrimination and privilege in the arts. It focuses, in particular, on ways in which the historical infantilization of the poor continues to influence artistic and policy decisions in the twenty-first century, and highlights the importance and challenges of emerging cultural capital in the sub-field of avant-garde and experimental theatre practice – the context in which emerging theatre-makers mostly operate.

### KEYWORDS

Theatre; UK; cultural policy; class; cultural capital; politics

## Introduction

In the introduction to this special issue, we outlined the AHRC-funded research network, *Incubate Propagate*, of which I was principle investigator, and from which this special issue has evolved.<sup>1</sup> In this article I will place the aims of the network in dialogue with some key and recurring concerns in contemporary debates around class identification in the twenty-first century. As further detailed in this issue's introduction, *Incubate Propagate* sought to bring together arts funders, producers and scholars working in theatre and the cultural industries to address the challenges faced by emerging artists from low-income backgrounds in seeking to build a professional theatre-making career. 'Class', as a term, was evoked far less often in discussion than might have been anticipated given the project's aims, and often with hesitancy or discomfort. Those of us convening the workshops likewise hesitated to use the term 'working-class', preferring the less loaded 'backgrounds of socio-economic disadvantage' as a descriptor for the artists we were focused on supporting. This article will seek to examine some of the reasons why this may have been so, and argue that, despite the complexities of class identification in the twenty-first century, it is nonetheless vital to keep talking about it if the socio-

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economic inequities that are deeply rooted in the theatre-making ecology<sup>2</sup> are ever to be contested or overturned.

The first section of the article will address some of the reasons why it has become so difficult to talk productively about class at precisely the time when the conversation appears to be so needed. Not only are there uncomfortable power relationships revealed by the act of classification itself, but the task of arriving at meaningful, consistent and coherent classes through which cohorts of the population can be identified has been made much more complex by intersectional concerns, such as race and gender, which run throughout, and thus problematise, economically-defined categories of hierarchy. Race, in particular, as Satnam Virdee (2019) argues, has been, for some decades, consigned to its own sub-field, outwith the mainstream of sociological research into class analysis, despite the earlier work of influential theorists, such as Stuart Hall, who insisted on thinking race and class together. Moreover, as Virdee (2019) and Sivamohan Valluvan (2019) both argue, the label of 'working-class' has often been racialised to imply 'white working-class' thus excluding people of colour from such a classification in order to promote discourses of racist nationalism on both the left and right.

In the subsequent sections, I will argue that despite the many difficulties of conclusively defining how class might now be understood, insisting on a common and pluralist identification of all those who are discriminated against in terms of their place in the socio-economic hierarchy remains necessary, not despite the complexity of reaching contemporary definitions, but because engaging with that very complexity reveals both the extent of the problem and the specific ways in which discrimination is operating. To this end, I will look briefly at economic and social capital before turning, in some detail, to the important role played by cultural capital within the theatre industry. Here, I will firstly argue that when cultural attention is paid to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, they are too often located as receivers or beneficiaries of someone else's idea of culture, rather than as agents who are granted the capacity and resources to become taste-makers and artistic leaders in ways that might change, or even threaten, the status quo.

In the final section, I will unpack the distinction between 'highbrow' and 'emerging' cultural capital. Here, I will propose that, despite the narrative in which sectors such as live art and vanguard models of performance locate themselves in opposition to a dominant cultural tradition of theatre, the currencies afforded to different models of 'emerging' culture are calculated and consecrated in just the same way, if by different cultural actors, as the currencies of the canon of 'highbrow' culture has always been. In conclusion, I will argue that we need to keep talking about class in all its complexity, because it is only by so doing that we are able to recognise, analyse and challenge the unlevel playing field of social and cultural capital on which our creative industries are constructed and (for those readers who identify with my own location in the cultural hierarchy) our own positions of privilege and power are sustained.

## **The difficulties of talking about class**

The difficulties of talking about class begin with the inescapable fact that the very act of classification – the power to name, define and allocate – is, in itself, a deployment of social and cultural privilege. Discussing the first formal measures of class developed by

the Registrar General's Office in 1911, Mike Savage *et al* note that these were not entirely based on neutral economic criteria, but were also informed by loaded ideas of cultural hierarchy. Is it a co-incidence, the authors ask, 'that a class schema which placed professional classes at the top was actually devised by professional civil servants and academics' (2015, 35)? Regardless of the specifics of how class comes to be measured in different socio-political contexts, the very act of classification, as Beverley Skeggs notes, reveals the cultural positioning of the classifier, and acts 'to capture the classified within discourse' (2004, 18). Indeed, this special issue, curated and edited by academics, who also defined the parameters of participation in the *Incubate Propagate* project itself, is not immune from such a cautionary note. The assignment of class to individuals is not a neutral descriptive activity, but the very process by which the classifier's preferred discursive system is created and sustained.

One alternative, that may avoid such imperialist implications, is a call for self-identification. Yet, as Wendy Bottero notes, empirical research consistently shows that people are

reluctant to claim class identities, and adopt a "defensive", "hesitant", "ambivalent" or "ambiguous" attitude to class labels. People recognize the continuing salience of inequality, are willing to talk about class as a political issue, but refuse to place themselves "within" classes, often explicitly disavowing class identities. (2004, 987)

Class dis-identification is accompanied, Bottero adds, by a tendency to identify as 'ordinary', rather than lower or higher than an assumed middle-class (2004, 998). While Bottero's research demonstrates this gravitation to the centre to be the case across the class spectrum, Savage *et al* note that when respondents are required to identify with class, there is a greater tendency for those nearer the bottom of class hierarchies to class up, than those who are nearer the top of class hierarchies to class down (2015, 367) but I would suggest that the opposite is likely to be the case in the context of the arts. While cultural representations of the 'lower' or 'working' classes are often undesirable ones that may well discourage some people from self-identifying as such (see Skeggs 2004, 99), in the context of theatre, or the arts more broadly, the identification with working-class origins often conversely carries with it a politically-loaded cultural capital which may hold real benefit. Thus, classing down to self-identify as working-class may indeed be undertaken by many artists who would be categorised as holding significant privileges via other, more objective, means of classification. This widening of what constitutes a working-class artist might then operate to marginalise those in the most disadvantaged of circumstances or dilute the support available to them.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the challenge of many members of the public rejecting class identification altogether, or mis-aligning themselves with class identities that may be culturally felt, but remain contestable, there is also the difficulty of identifying and employing workable, meaningful and consistent twenty-first century class categories in the first place, given the distance travelled since the origins of class discourse in the nineteenth century. Class analysis can be traced back to the pioneering work of Karl Marx, in which there were only two classes of significance – the workers and those who owned, and profited from, the labour of the workers. While contemporary accounts of class differ, in ways and to degrees that are well beyond the scope of this article, all have necessarily expanded Marx's categories to better reflect the changing landscape of employment and labour practices.

Notable among these would be John Goldthorpe's NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) schema established in the 1970s and still used today by the Office of National Statistics.<sup>4</sup>

Many contemporary class analysts have departed significantly from Goldthorpe in their consideration of accumulated cultural and social capital alongside economic capital as criteria for classification,<sup>5</sup> such as Mike Savage and Fiona Devine who devised the categories for the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) in 2013.<sup>6</sup> In fact, very few class theorists would not now argue that understandings of class need to extend beyond economic capital. But where there does remain significant discursive disagreement is the degree to which other diversions from Marx need to be undertaken. For Bottero (2004), work such as Savage's (2000) *Class Analysis and Social Transformation* should not be content merely to challenge the limitations of Marx's binary and solely economic schema, but should also be explicit that when socio-economic stratification is constructed from complex, individualised identities, there must be a clean break with other elements at the heart of Marxist class analysis such as exploitation, collective identification and class conflict.

For Marx, the class relation between those who laboured and those who owned the work of the labourers was exploitative because the owners gained by taking for themselves the surplus value of the labourers' work. This resulted in antagonism, or conflict, between the classes, and this conflict led to the need for collectivism and unionisation in the ranks of the labourers to defend and protect their rights. To relocate this traditional class analysis in the contemporary context raises real problems as Bottero (2004) argues throughout her article. In the field of theatre, the subject of this special issue, the relationship between cultural producers and aspiring theatre-makers from backgrounds of disadvantage holds no immediately evident equivalence to the Marxist model. The cultural producers are not exploiting theatre-makers from backgrounds of disadvantage when the latter are denied access to the profession, because the former are not reliant on, or profiting from, their labour. Such theatre-makers are simply excluded from the labour market. Thus, there is no relationship of explicit conflict because those who are excluded are having nothing taken from them and, moreover, hold no power (such as the withdrawal of their labour) with which they can defend their rights or begin to unionise. This, coupled with the complexity of a contemporary discourse which must now take into account not only social and cultural capital but also intersectional inequities such as race and gender, leads Bottero to ask whether 'the project of "renewal", that is constituted by Savage's culturalist approach to class analysis is so broad that it should, perhaps, be regarded more as a general account of stratification itself, than as a specifically "class" project' (2004, 987).

The danger, however, of rejecting, as Bottero suggests, these historic aspects of 'class' in systems of more individualised hierarchical stratification (2004, 992), is that to do so risks minimising, or papering over, the conflict that was foregrounded in traditional class analysis and which still exists today. I would be much more cautionary, in this regard, than Bottero, who argues that because hierarchical inequality is propagated, not through conscious class identification and intended conflict, but 'simply by going about our daily lives' it cannot usefully be termed class conflict or exclusion (995). On the contrary, this article will continue to insist, pace Bourdieu, that it is precisely via the everyday cultural activities, preferences and mundane professional assumptions and actions of those

towards the top of the social and cultural hierarchy that class conflict and exclusion now operate. It is critical to uphold such terminology in order to resist Bottero's reduction of class conflict to something that happens at every stage of the hierarchy between those with slightly more and those with slightly less. Such a move would undermine the importance, to the *Incubate Propagate* project, of the vital schism that lies between those whose class background fully equips them for entry into the cultural professions and those whose class background excludes them, as will be discussed in subsequent sections of this article.

In some ways, I would argue, the contemporary replacement of exploitation with exclusion is even more damaging, given that the excluded hold no power at all in such a relationship to challenge the status quo (see Brabec 2019, 43–45). I would furthermore argue that the relationship between those working in the arts who might be 'classed' differently remains antagonistic given that the resources available (funding, jobs, opportunities) are finite and limited: for one 'class' to hold the majority of those resources requires another 'class' to be prevented from claiming their fair share. It could also be argued, in an industry such as theatre that relies predominantly on public funding, that the dominance of a privileged class among the producers, artists and audiences (see Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018) is exploitative in that it relies upon the taxes paid by those who may not be given fair access to the opportunities that their taxes subsidise. Were those from lower socio-economic classes able to with-hold their taxes from arts subsidy, such exploitation would quickly become explicitly visible.

Thus, for this article, I will be holding in balance the contemporary understandings of class relations as unstable, contested and far more complex than those envisaged in traditional class analysis, with the conviction that the exploitation and antagonism identified by Marx cannot be taken out of the picture. This conviction would be substantiated by certain critiques of the GBCS which challenge the apparent absence of conflict in Savage and Devine's stratification model, arguing that it gives no sense of how the privileges of the elite have been won and sustained *precisely as a causal result* of the economic hardship, cultural and social deprivations of those categorised in the lower classes (Toscano and Woodcock 2015, 513).

Furthermore, and notwithstanding more recent class discourse in the arts in which class consciousness has become significantly more pronounced, I would oppose Bottero, to agree with those she challenges, and argue that 'people do not have to explicitly recognize class issues, or identify with discrete class groupings, for class processes to operate. All that is required is for specific cultural practices to be bound up with the reproduction of hierarchy. The emphasis is not on the development (or not) of class consciousness, but rather on the classed nature of particular social and cultural practices.' (Bottero 2004, 989)

### **Class capitals: economic**

While the analysis of contemporary class relations tends, for the most part, to side-line the Marxist emphasis on exploitation, antagonism and collectivism, it does, on the whole, retain Marx's emphasis on economic capital as the key indicator of class location. The NS-SEC model noted above may break class down into nine locations to reflect the much greater complexity of today's workforce, but nonetheless continues the dominant tradition

of historical class analysis in its focus on occupation and income as the primary characteristics that define an individual's place in the class hierarchy. Even models such as that constructed by Savage and Devine, which acknowledge the importance of social and cultural capital much more explicitly, remain ultimately tied to bands of particular types of professions.

Economic indicators of class are particularly problematic in the theatre industry where even relatively successful professionals survive on wages that are not comparable to other culturally equivalent professions, such as academia or the media industries more widely. Yet, the actor, creative producer, or theatre-maker who is working on a wage that is often well below the legal minimum wage threshold (and nearly always without job security) may possess strong cultural and social capital that does not map onto the social or cultural status of those earning equivalent amounts of money outside of the creative and cultural industries. For this reason, among others that I will turn to, it is critical that any discussion of class within this context takes full account of how social and cultural capitals not only *shape* class locations in a field where there are few significant differentiations of economic capital, but are also instrumental in how class discrimination and class privilege are able to operate.

None of this, of course, is to deny that economic considerations are not paramount to the difficulties those from lower socio-economic backgrounds encounter in gaining access to professional theatre-making opportunities. Both the PANIC report (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018) and the ROUTES IN evaluation report<sup>7</sup> focus, although not exclusively, on the economic barriers to professions in the arts; highlighting in particular the difficulties of those without financial support taking on unpaid internships, or low paid entry positions. But what became clear from the *Incubate Propagate* project is that before they even reach this very real, material, hurdle, the would-be-artist is too often required to draw, firstly, on their reserves of social capital: who do they know in the industry? Who can get them access to the competitive, unpaid internship in the first place?

### **Class capitals: social**

In the cultural and creative industries (CCIs) social capital is distinctly more valuable than it might be in other professions. Social capital counts for relatively little in becoming a teacher, for example. If you are able to gain the right qualifications, and jobs are available, not knowing an extensive network of existing teachers is unlikely to prove an insurmountable obstacle to entering the profession. In the CCIs, however, social capital is immensely valuable. An emerging artist from a background low in social capital, even if gifted with economic support from their family, will still struggle to win the opportunity to work as an assistant director in a prestigious London theatre; whereas an emerging artist whose parents are close friends of the director, or even simply move in circles within the same network, might be able to gain such an opportunity for their son or daughter regardless of family income.

The PANIC report (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2018) observes two key factors that are distinctive to the CCIs, and which evidence the importance of a full consideration of social capital when evaluating privilege and disadvantage in the arts. Firstly, the social networks enjoyed by workers in the CCIs are relatively 'homogenous and coherent' (10), demonstrating that 'cultural and creative workers have narrow social networks, suggesting a type



of social closure within the sector' (3). Secondly, this hermeneutic community is not only difficult for outsiders to penetrate, but also holds political and ethical views that are widely shared within the CCIs, but distinctly different from those held by the general population (25–33). On a graph showing the proclivities of different professions for liberalism/authoritarian and left/right politics, the PANIC report shows the CCIs as being the most liberal, left-wing and pro-welfare of all other industries (26–27). Furthermore, their taste and choice of cultural activities stand out as distinctly different from every other group, including those in the same NS – SEC category (32). These results are, perhaps, unsurprising, but they do underline the significant fact that has been accepted and unchallenged for too long. As the report concludes, this empirical research 'adds to the picture of a "creative class" quite distinct from the rest of society' (33).

The significance of this is underlined in the report's conclusion which highlights the issues of access: how do those from the 'rest of society' penetrate the creative class without the required reserves of social capital already in place? The scoping workshops undertaken in preparation for the *Incubate Propagate* project (see Tomlin 2017) noted that the existing work being undertaken by university theatre departments, and projects such as the Weston Jerwood Creative Bursaries (WJCB) scheme<sup>8</sup> was precisely to provide graduates (specifically those from working-class backgrounds in WJCB's case) with a supply of social capital by connecting them to existing networks of theatre-making and professional opportunity. This would be harnessed to the supply of cultural capital they had gained from a university degree in the arts, and be supplemented, in the case of the WJCB, with the economic capital to enable them to be paid for high-level internships. For those who had not undertaken higher education, however, stocks of all three types of capital are likely to be low, raising particular barriers at three key points: the access to social networks through which internships might be made available; the access to economic capital to support the undertaking of low or unpaid internships and, finally, low levels of cultural capital to enable them to lever agency as an artist within existing hierarchical structures both during and beyond the internship stage of their career.

### **Class capitals: cultural**

Turning now to cultural capital, it is important to begin by saying that it is not, of course, the case that emerging artists who have not benefitted from higher education, or accumulated equivalent cultural capital from their family background, have no or little cultural sensibility or vision to offer. It is rather to argue that the cultural capital that they do hold may well not be recognised as the right kind of cultural capital that has been established, and continues to be authorised, by existing cultural discourses and leading advocates. Those holding the highest levels of cultural capital (arts academics, art critics, producers, directors, funders and policy makers) are precisely those with the power to arbitrate taste and establish patterns of cultural consumption that become authorised, or consecrated, as legitimate and of value.

Four decades ago, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) first outlined how the dominant class was marked by its need for distinction, and described the process of consecration by which the cultural fraction of the dominant class authorised certain avant-garde innovations to become consecrated as high culture, first by the universities, and ultimately by the dominant cultural mainstream. To maintain their distinction from the middle- and working-



classes, he argues, the dominant class had to remain vigilant about the popularisation of once-high cultural outputs (at which point they lose cultural capital because they are no longer signs of distinction) and the need to constantly reinvigorate cultural trends to enable them to keep ahead of the middle-class who Bourdieu characterised through their common aspiration to gain in cultural capital by learning from the narrative of the cultural fraction of the dominant class.

What Bourdieu recognised as a 'dominant' class would now be located, under NS-SEC categories, in the 'Higher Managerial' and 'Professional' classes, and under Savage and Devine's new schema in the 'Elite' and the 'Established Middle' classes. The names may change but the process of consecration remains; a process which constitutes, as Skeggs argues, the assertion of authority through perspective that confers value onto preference (2004, 140). The perspective, or preference, of those who hold the cultural power to act as taste-makers, she warns, can eclipse or denigrate the perspectives or tastes of others. So, in order to succeed in such a context, the emerging artist must acquire and reflect the tastes that have already been consecrated as 'of value' by the cultural elite. Such cultural taste, or capital, is acquired, predominantly, through university education in the arts, although this can also be bolstered by previously acquired capital through school or family connections. Thus, it is not only due to economic constraints or lack of social capital that the emerging artist who does not hold a graduate qualification will struggle to find a foothold in theatre-making development processes. In addition to these initial hurdles, the cultural capital that they hold is unlikely to reflect the consecrated cultural tastes that are implicitly established as criteria for potential success in the field.

What is perhaps, on the face of it, surprising, is that an industry, in which the new and the innovative are prized so highly, holds so little appetite to welcome tastes that do not conform to the existing cultural palette. There are two reasons for this that I will now go on to explore in some detail. The first of these is that not everyone is trusted to re-set the cultural agenda, and the history of infantilising the working and 'lower' classes still pervades the theatre industry, as it does society more widely. The second is that, in today's cultural landscape, the required innovation for the theatre industry as a whole is mostly nurtured by the cultural leaders of the heavily subsidised sub-field of emerging cultural capital – the avant-garde, or experimental wing of the arts – which locates itself in opposition to the highbrow cultural product of tradition such as Shakespeare and opera. This sub-field is the context in which the majority of emerging theatre-makers operate, but sadly it can prove just as resistant to innovation coming from outside of the traditional graduate-access development programmes as the guardians of highbrow culture have always been, if for very different reasons.

### **Infantilisation of the working-class**

Frantz Fanon's seminal text *Black Skin White Masks* ([1952] 2008) describes how black people were positioned, by the hegemonic ideology of the time, as closer to children or non-human animals, than adult humans. Likewise, as Beverley Skeggs argues, the poor of all races were not, historically, seen as predominantly unfortunate, or victims of an unfair economic system, but essentialised as biologically degenerate and inferior human beings (2004, 37), who required 'both discipline and care' (35). Such historical perceptions located all black people, and all poor people, to be closer to nature or infancy and thus

further from cultural capacity, than the white middle-classes. While few working in the 'liberal left-wing' culture of the creative industries would consciously hold such opinions today, there is evidence that suspicion remains that those from less privileged socio-economic backgrounds, in particular, have a cultural 'deficit' (Skeggs 2004, 39) that corresponds to their low stock of economic capital; a prejudice that may well be doubled for working-class artists of colour. Such pernicious thinking continues to justify the rejection – on cultural grounds – of artistic preferences that may jar with the preferences of the cultural elite. This rejection may be based, not necessarily on the merits of the proposal, but on the assumption that nothing of cultural value could emerge from a socio-economic background which is assumed to be devoid of cultural capacity. As Fanon acutely observed, such assumptions inevitably become internalised by those who are the objects of denigration who subsequently come to value themselves and their own cultural capacity accordingly.

Such a premise might partly explain why those from lower socio-economic backgrounds have tended to appear less as artists in their own right in the theatre-making profession, and much more often as participants in professional productions that are dramaturgically designed around the inclusion of 'real people'. I have written at length on this trend of staging those whose value – to the predominantly middle-class theatre-makers and audiences – seems to lie in their evident lack of professional capacity which exposes their 'authenticity' as they appear to be presenting their real selves (see Tomlin 2018). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full analysis of such practice, which varies considerably from one case to another, it seems that the use of 'real people' in some cases could risk becoming an operation whereby the 'authenticity' that was historically used to denigrate the potential of the poor to be fully cultured citizens, is here appropriated for the cultural profit of the professional theatre-makers in a way that would explicitly reconstitute the exploitative relationship between classes that Marx identified. As Skeggs argues, it is only those who hold cultural power who are able to use their perspective to re-allocate value to something that has previously been denigrated. Thus, 'properties and products associated with the working-class' (such as their authenticity) can be 'taken out of context, re-signified and re-valued by those with access to symbolic power' (Skeggs 2004, 107). Those from lower socio-economic backgrounds hold worth as 'authentic real people' but not so much, it seems, as potential theatre-making artists.

This may also explain why, although socio-economic disadvantage featured as one of three priority categories in the increased attendance and participation initiatives of Arts Council England under the New Labour Government (1997–2010), it was not, during this time, seen as a priority concern in the Arts Council's policy moves to increase the diversification of professional artists. Here, and until more recently, the emphasis was directed towards improving access to professional careers for artists from the other two priority categories for increased attendance and participation: artists of colour and artists with disabilities.<sup>9</sup> Given that socio-economic disadvantage was the third category of concern in the five-year audience and participation development programme it might have been expected that it would have received the same attention in terms of increasing the diversity of professional artists. That it did not, suggests that implicit narratives of infantilisation of the poor continued to influence policy, even if on an unconscious level. It is significant in this respect that, as noted in the introduction,

there was a sense among some working-class artists of colour who attended the *Incubate Propagate* workshops that initiatives aimed at all artists of colour tended to be monopolised by those from the higher social classes. Artists could be racially diverse, and carry disability, it seems, but they could rarely be envisaged as emerging from classes which were assumed to hold little cultural capacity. Rather those from such backgrounds were too often, perhaps, perceived as needing to benefit from increased cultural attendance and participation in projects that were created and led by those who held recognised cultural authority and could thus ‘improve’ the lives of those attending.<sup>10</sup>

The low engagement in the arts by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, that is regularly cited in studies such as the ACE five-year initiative noted above, is too often taken as evidence that backs up implicit or explicit narratives that posit the cultural deficit of the working-class. Yet, as the Warwick report demonstrates, cultural activities understood more widely are regularly frequented by the general public of all backgrounds which suggests ‘that low engagement is more the effect of a mismatch between the public’s taste and the publicly funded cultural offer – posing a challenge of relevance as well as accessibility’ (Warwick Commission 2015, 34). So, again, we return to the challenge posed by the inequitable distribution of cultural capital. Those who hold such capital gain access to the positions by which they can maintain their own tastes and preferences as that which is to be aspired to and valued, notwithstanding that such work is funded indirectly by a public who do not share those preferences. Yet those holding alternative cultural preferences have no power, precisely because their cultural preferences mark them as lacking the cultural capacity to enter the cultural professions, to disrupt the status quo. Moreover, in the contemporary theatre-making context, as I will argue in the following section, it is not just a simple case of holding the ‘wrong’ cultural preferences that brands you as culturally deficient. ‘Classing up’ culturally has, of course, never been as simple as merely learning the classics, citing Shakespeare or attending opera, but in the twenty-first century sub-field of avant-garde or experimental theatre where theatre-makers mostly seek to begin their careers things get even more complicated.

## Emerging cultural capital

Although Bourdieu was clear, at his time of writing, that consecration was a process, and not a static location in which historically-recognised high culture (such as Shakespeare and the opera) remained closed to newer avant-garde artists and forms (such as John Cage and Robert Wilson), the nature of cultural capital has somewhat pluralised and complexified in the decades that have followed. Savage *et al* identify two important forms of cultural capital in the GBCS analysis. What the authors term ‘highbrow’ cultural capital remains powerful, especially among the second highest category, the established middle-class, where the older demographic dominate; but there is another cultural capital in circulation that the authors describe as ‘emerging’ which holds value throughout the class categories in which the younger demographic are overly represented (2015, 95–126).

The holder of emerging capital has been characterised as a ‘cultural omnivore’ (Savage *et al.* 2015, 114) whose tastes are not restricted to highbrow cultural products but range over an eclectic mix of highbrow and ‘lowbrow’ cultural products. However, unlike some

North American sociologists, with whom the term first originated, Savage *et al* are far from convinced that the eclecticism of ‘cool’ is a sign of cultural openness or the end of class snobbery (114). Rather, the authors argue, certain correspondents in the GBCS who expressed their liking for tastes that might have been previously dismissed as ‘lowbrow’, nonetheless reveal their high store of emerging cultural capital, not through what they like, but by how they like it: ‘it may be about consuming the “wrong kind” of (vulgar) pop culture in the *right* way . . . a particular style of aesthetic appreciation, a certain detached, knowing orientation to popular culture that demonstrates both an eclectic knowledge and a privileged understanding’ (118 original emphasis).

This goes beyond the expansion of culture from highbrow-only to a more omnivorous tendency, especially among the young, which might, if that were all it were, be a welcome development that opened doors to more diverse cultural tastes than have traditionally been accepted as holding cultural value. It rather marks the transition of cultural capital being less a store of cultural knowledge and more a cultural capacity to critically engage with ever-changing trends and own the confidence to occupy almost any cultural position with the required attitude of sincerity, irony or self-reflection. As Savage *et al* note, when speaking to those who occupied class positions at the higher end of his spectrum, ‘there was a distinctive *knowingness* to this engagement . . . Taste in these areas [popular culture] was often highly intricate and discerning’ (2015, 114–5 original emphasis). Thus, it is not merely *what* your preferences are, but how these are presented, framed and justified, all skills that demonstrate not only a familiarity with the rules of the game of taste but a cultural confidence to play it well and set new trends, rather than merely follow existing ones. These are skills and dispositions that those from backgrounds that have been characterised as culturally deficient, and, in particular, those who have not benefitted from a university education which seeks to instil in their students such skills and confidence, may well find irrevocably out of reach.

The distinction between highbrow and emerging cultural capital is particularly crucial in the context of the *Incubate Propagate* network which focused on diversifying entry level opportunities for emerging artists to become theatre-makers. While musicians and actors may well begin their careers in orchestras, operas or Shakespeare productions, those who wish to make their own theatre will most often need to navigate the opportunities available within the landscape of the small-scale, independent and experimental sector which is characterised by the very highest levels of emerging cultural capital: avant-garde practice that, while often explicitly defining itself in opposition to the highbrow cultural capital of mainstream forms of theatre, ultimately aspires in its own right to consecration by the universities, its own critical discourse, and the required level of validation from public funding bodies to support an artist’s international profile and reputation.

It was often proposed, during the *Incubate Propagate* workshops, that sectors such as live art and vanguard models of performance were more inclusive and diverse than the dominant cultural tradition of theatre, yet it is important to remember that the currencies afforded to different models of ‘emerging’ culture are calculated and consecrated in just the same way, if by different cultural actors, as the currencies of the canon of ‘highbrow’ culture has always been. While those holding high stocks of emerging cultural capital do not hold equal cultural power to those holding high stocks of highbrow cultural capital, the process of taste making remains the same. Those who hold the capital, hold the power

to establish their own taste as the criteria for what is validated, funded and produced. The work selected will then confirm, and further consolidate, the particular narrative of taste that enables those who share such taste to remain in, or aspire to, positions of power within that field. Those who do not share the required taste will be unable to validate the worth of their own practice or vision against the existing criteria. This is not to suggest that those in positions of cultural power (in which cohort I would be included) are acting in bad faith. Many, if not most, try hard to put aside personal preferences and view proposals and work objectively on their own terms, but putting aside personal taste is a very tricky business, as Paul Geary discusses in detail in his article in this special issue.

## Conclusion

When personal taste is understood as integral to the professional roles of producers, funders and policy makers in the arts, and it is furthermore acknowledged that to put aside personal taste that has become embodied over a lifetime is a difficult ask, the challenge of diversification becomes apparent. It would seem that the critically necessary move to diversify the theatre-makers selected for support, would be to diversify the body of cultural leaders in ways that might start to redress the class balance, alongside – and in conjunction with – the need for much greater inclusion of artists of colour and artists with disabilities, to begin to break down the ‘social closure’ that Brook et al identified in the sector (2018, 3). In this way, the cultural coherence of those working in the CCIs will be productively disrupted by a much greater range of political opinions and cultural tastes, rendering the CCIs more permeable to those from a diversity of backgrounds, and subsequently able to make a diversified cultural offer that is more reflective of the society to which it belongs. This conclusion arose again and again throughout the *Incubate Propagate* debates, with calls to arts funders for a class-focused version of ACE’s Change Makers<sup>11</sup> and the need to develop diverse, local producers, particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, through projects such Creative People and Places and the Performing Arts Producing Hubs in Bradford and Derby.

What this article hopes to have established is not just the importance of continuing to talk about class, but the critical importance of understanding the role played by social and cultural, as well as economic, capital in the pervasive class discrimination, exclusion and privilege that continue to shame the field of theatre-making in the twenty-first century. Low stores of economic capital prevent those from lower socio-economic backgrounds from supporting themselves through free or low-paid internships or early-career opportunities. Low stores of social capital make it difficult, if not impossible, to access the ‘narrow social networks’ (Brook, O’Brien, and Taylor 2018, 3) of the cultural and creative industries which are essential to gain a foothold in any artistic profession. But the challenges for those who do not hold the right kind of cultural capital has been the focus of this article because the uncomfortable truth for those of us who would acknowledge their role as members of the cultural elite, is to recognise that the implicit – and often unconscious – narrative of cultural deficit, is precisely what maintains our own privilege and power. The process of ‘distinction’ that Bourdieu identified is a process that continues to operate to secure the progressiveness of the middle-class by holding the tastes of the working-class at a perjorative distance from their own. Distinction, after all, requires something that one can be distinct from.

We need to keep talking about class in all its complexity because it is only by so doing that we are able to recognise, analyse and challenge the unlevel playing field of social and cultural capital on which our creative industries are constructed and (for those readers who identify with my own location in the cultural hierarchy) our own positions of privilege are sustained. As Skeggs also concludes, ‘to deny the existence of class, or to deny that one is middle-class, is to abdicate responsibility for the relationships in which one is repeatedly reproducing power’ (2004, 118).

## Notes

1. See Tomlin 2020 for project report.
2. See Introduction, and O’Brien in this issue, for recent reports that evidence the increasing prevalence of class discrimination in the creative and cultural industries more widely, and theatre in particular.
3. See also Katie Beswick’s article in this special issue which conversely argues for the validity of ‘feeling’ working-class.
4. This consists of nine classifications that does not include full time students: 1.1 Large employers and higher managerial and administrative occupations; 1.2 Higher professional occupations; 2. Lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations; 3. Intermediate occupations; 4. Small employers and own account workers; 5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations; 6. Semi-routine occupations; 7. Routine occupations; 8. Never worked and long term unemployed. (Savage et al. 2015, 41)
5. Although the idea of status had been introduced into Marxist-initiated class discourse by Max Weber, it was the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) that significantly began to address the notion of cultural capital as a primary factor within social stratification. Although Bourdieu maintained three major class locations that reflected the degree of economic capital held – the dominant class, the middle-class (*petit bourgeoisie*) and the working-class (*class populaire*) – he introduced the idea of fractions within the classes that were characterised not by the individual’s role in the production aspect of the marketplace (their profession), but by their habits of consumption.
6. This consisted of seven classifications: 1. Elite; 2. Established middle-class; 3. Technical middle-class; 4. New affluent workers; 5. Traditional working-class; 6. Emerging service workers; 7. Precariat. (Savage et al. 2015, 174). For detailed analysis as well as significant critiques of the GBCS see *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 63.
7. ROUTES IN was a gathering hosted by Common at Hackney Empire on the 4 February 2019 to develop practical solutions against the lack of socio-economic diversity, access and inclusion within the UK theatre industry. The report is unpublished.
8. See also Geissendorfer and Danielson’s article in this issue.
9. Initiatives here would include Decibel, Unlimited, the Black Regional Initiative in Theatre (BRIT) and Change Makers.
10. As noted in the Introduction this omission may be redressed by recent Arts Council England initiatives such as the ongoing action research project Creative People and Places (CPP) launched in 2013 and the Performing Arts Producing Hubs in Bradford and Derby launched in 2019. Both of these demonstrate a greater commitment to raising the capacity of cultural production from within areas of socio-economic disadvantage.
11. An ACE funding initiative to increase the diversity of cultural leaders by supporting Black and minority ethnic theatre makers, and disabled and BME cultural leaders. See Kayza Rose’s interview in this issue.

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