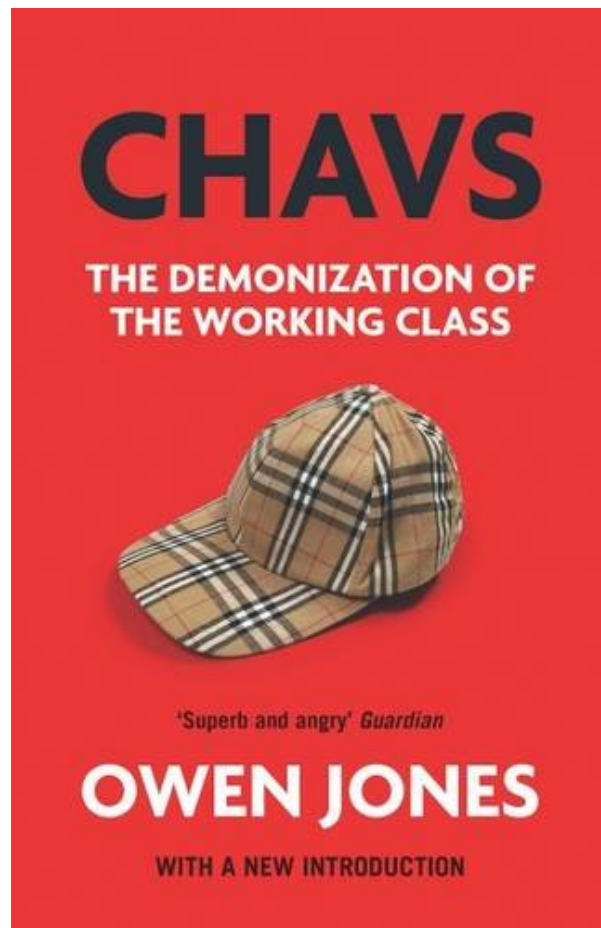


CHAVS: THE DEMONIZATION OF THE WORKING CLASS BY OWEN JONES



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CHAVS

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THE WORKING CLASS



'Superb and angry' Guardian

OWEN JONES

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION

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Bestselling investigation into the myth and reality of working-class life in contemporary Britain

In modern Britain, the working class has become an object of fear and ridicule. From Little Britain's Vicky Pollard to the demonization of Jade Goody, media and politicians alike dismiss as feckless, criminalized and ignorant a vast, underprivileged swathe of society whose members have become stereotyped by one, hate-filled word: chavs.

In this acclaimed investigation, Owen Jones explores how the working class has gone from "salt of the earth" to "scum of the earth." Exposing the ignorance and prejudice at the heart of the chav caricature, he portrays a far more complex reality. The chav stereotype, he argues, is used by governments as a convenient fig leaf to avoid genuine engagement with social and economic problems and to justify widening inequality.

When Chavs was first published in 2011 it opened up the discussion of class in Britain. Then, in the public debate after the riots of that summer, Owen Jones's thesis was proved right—the working class were the scapegoats for everything that was wrong with Britain.

This new edition includes a new chapter, reflecting on the overwhelming response to the book and the situation in Britain today.

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Class War

By Diziet

I hesitated to title this review 'Class War' - it seems so out-of-date, so 'old Labour'. But that is what this book is about. It is about the sustained economic, social and ideological attack on the majority of the population of this country.

The idea of 'chavs' (US equivalent probably 'trailer trash') is, these days, so pervasive that as I read the first few chapters, I had my doubts. The book seemed merely an apologia for a post-industrial lumpenproletariat, a group of alienated misfits beyond the reach of the rest of society. But Jones' analysis is far wider, deeper and more powerful than that and deserves as wide an audience as possible.

The book starts with a shocking comparison between the media coverage of Shannon Matthews and Madeleine McCann. The point is forcefully made that the coverage clearly showed a deep-rooted class prejudice - and ignorance. The McCann's come from the same class as the majority of journalists, leader writers and 'opinion formers'. The same journalists have virtually no experience of the world of Shannon Matthews. Jones makes the point in a quote from Kevin Maguire of the Daily Mirror:

'Increasingly, the lives of journalists have become divorced from those of the rest of us. 'I can't think of a national newspaper editor with school-age kids who has them in a state school,' [Maguire] reflects. 'On top of that, most journalists at those levels are given private medical insurance. So you're kind of taken out of everyday life.' (P27)

Jones continues:

'More than anything, it is this ignorance of working-class life that explains how Karen Matthews became a template for people living in working-class communities. 'Perhaps it's because we're all middle class that we tut at the tragic transition of aspirational working class to feckless, feral underclass, and sneer at the brainless blobs of lard who spend their days on leatherette sofas in front of plasma TVs, chewing the deep-fried cud over Jeremy Kyle,' speculated commentator Christina Patterson. 'We've got a word for them too: "Chavs"' (P27)

(Jeremy Kyle is, in this context, roughly equivalent to Jerry Springer, but without the humour). So how did this come about? How has the whole working class come to be seen as a 'feckless, feral underclass'? Jones continues with a look at 'Class Warriors'. He suggests that:

'Thatcherism fought the most aggressive class war in British history...Thatcher wanted to end the class war - but on the terms of the upper crust of British society. 'Old fashioned Tories say there isn't any class war,' declared Tory newspaper editor Peregrine Worsthorne. 'New Tories make no bones about it: we are class warriors and we expect to be victorious.' (P48)

This class war was waged as an attack on collectivism - the promotion of an aggressive individualism that sees success or failure as a purely personal matter. Everyone should naturally aspire to be middle class. This is not simply the adoption of a neoliberal free market economic philosophy but also an essentially neoconservative cultural approach - defining whole working class communities as 'chavs'. And it worked, thoroughly and conclusively:

'Even before the advent of New Labour, Thatcherism had ensured that the working class would be bereft of political champions. 'The real triumph was to have transformed not just one party, but two,' as [Geoffrey] Howe was later to put it.' (P71)

This reminded me very much of Peter Osborne's 'The Triumph of the Political Class'. Hardly a left-wing firebrand, Osborne details the formation of a metropolitan elite. Osborne suggests:

'The Media Class and the Political Class share identical assumptions about life and politics. They are affluent, progressive, middle- and upper-middle class. This triumphant metropolitan elite has completely lost

its links with a wider civil society.' ('The Triumph of the Political Class', P259)

In case there was any doubt left, Jones states:

'New Labour, through programmes like its welfare reform, has propagated the chav caricature by spreading the idea that people are poor because they lack moral fibre. Surveys show that attitudes towards poverty are currently harder than they were under Thatcher. If people observe that even Labour holds the less fortunate to be personally responsible for their fate, why should they think any different? No wonder the image of communities teeming with feckless chavs has become so ingrained in recent years.' (P94)

Jones details how even supposedly liberal opinion can come to regard the working class as 'chavs'. By emphasising that the working class are predominantly white working class, liberal opinion can ignore the economic underpinnings of class in favour of, as Jones puts it, 'racialization':

'It's one of the ways people have made their snobbery socially acceptable,' says journalist Johann Hari: 'by acting as though they are defending immigrants from the "ignorant" white working class.'" (P116)

Although, in the past, television representations of working class life might have included Alf Garnett (US Archie Bunker), they also included shows like 'The Likely Lads' and 'The Rag Trade'. Nowadays working class representations seem limited to Vicky Pollard, Wayne and Waynetta, 'Shameless' (soon to be a US remake) or even 'Eden Lake' ('[i]t may not come as a surprise that the Daily Mail treated Eden Lake as though it was some kind of drama-documentary, quavering that it was 'all too real' and urging every politician to watch it.' P131)

The representations of the working class have changed as the economic conditions have changed. With the deindustrialization of large swathes of the country, the 'flexibilization' of the work force, the increasing numbers of low-paid, low-skill and part-time jobs, the labour market has become an 'hourglass' economy:

'highly paid jobs at one end, and swelling numbers of low-paid, unskilled jobs at the other. The middle-level occupations, on the other hand, are shrinking.' (P152)

This has significantly weakened the opportunities for collective action. When staff turnover is high, union power is limited. The attacks on the remaining bastions of union activity continue. The latest targets are public sector workers who are currently being portrayed as over-paid, pampered and secure, which is so far from the truth it is almost laughable. Given the 'hourglass economy', commentators who point to a lack of working class aspiration are rather missing the point.

Even after all this, the class war continues. Turning on the radio this morning, I heard that Vince Cable (Lib Dem Business Secretary in the current coalition government) is threatening further anti-union legislation. In the same news bulletin, it was announced that '[over the last 30 years] wages grew by over 100% for judges, barristers and solicitors, while they fell by 5% for forklift truck drivers and 3% for packers and bottlers.' (BBC 'TUC: Wage stagnation over decades as income gap widens').

After all that, it is very difficult to not agree with Owen Jones when he says:

'...as a government of millionaires led by an Old Etonian prepares to further demolish the living standards of millions of working class people, the time has rarely been so ripe for a new wave of class politics.' (P257)

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