

# The underclass in the united kingdom



Class is an issue that have some important relevance to sociologists, anthropologists, political economists and social historians. A simple definition could be said to be: the powerful and the powerless. To some, social class is a result of the fundamental economic structure of work and poverty within the society. Class in a different point of view can be seen as a key part of life and the cause and effects of an individual person life. Since 1997, the government in Britain has worked hardly to reduce or even finish the so called ‘ social exclusion’. It is noticeable that the use of the word exclusion gives the impression of moving backwards in time, almost like an older form of class politics. Some politicians argue that the nature of classes divisions comes from the existence of different interests within the people in society and that is the cause of how others see society in a division of bodies. In this paper, I will define and take a deep look in how the term ‘ underclass’ is seen in British culture and also taking a slightly look into popular culture.

In a society with classes division an individual’s status is what decides how high or how low the person fits into the classes definition or in which tier of society the person fits. Many elements have that influence, elements such as: education, family, legal status, among others. One point that normally is use to fix the idea is an individual’s lifestyle, alongside with markers like manners and language also helps to define class. By the 1980’s the term ‘ underclass’ was a very popular and very much used term in discussions regarding poverty and social classes in Britain.

“ For all its drawback, the word underclass captures the essence of the class predicament for many at the bottom; a complete absence of ladders,

whether basic skills, role models, education or a culture of work” (Andrew Adonis/Stephen Pollard)

To some observes the word ‘ underclass’ means a failure in the moral and social order, economic and social changes. The first person to use the term in Great Britain was the Scottish communist John Maclean back in 1918 and even nowadays the term has a negative connotation. But the term only entered the mainstream discussions spheres in the 1980’s because it was the most appropriate term to describe those who were suffering with the long-term unemployment process that was a big issue at the time. In the early 1980’s the issue of ‘ underclass’ and its meanings were pretty much exaggerated with the German-British political scientist Ralf Dahrendorf stating that “ underclass was a cancer which eats away the textures of societies and metastasises in ways which can increasingly be felt in all parts”. Apart from very radical opinions such as the one just cited, the lack of work and low payment made the people situated into the definition of ‘ underclass’ suffer with the perpetuation of some aspects or characteristics like poor education, single parenting and poor housing. And what was before related to the working class population like football was then and still is nowadays connected to the ‘ underclass’ population plus a lifestyle based on and surrounded by hostility, distinctive hair-style and large use of drugs and alcohol. Those are some of the reasons that perhaps made some observers say that the phrase ‘ class’ wasn’t appropriate. Another interesting fact is that specialists pointed out in more or less recent years is that mostly of the middle class in Great Britain did not influence social mobility and that Britain have less social mobility than the Nordic countries.

By the late 1990's the United Kingdom was a country with several different sub-cultures gaining popularity, but the one I am going to focus is the one that could be define as the lower level in the tier of classes, what for some politicians and specialists is the modern ' underclass' , within popular culture they are known as ' chavs'. Firstly , what is a ' chav'? There are many answers for that but the most common one is that ' chav' is a young person, with lower ore even none level of education, who follows a particular fashion and are also known as Townies, Steeks and Bazza. They are typically unemployed or white working who repeatedly engages in anti-social behaviour, drug abuse or other forms of delinquency and also most of the time live in council houses. In the beginning of the new millennium an increase interest over the so called ' chavs' that for some specialists like Keith Hayward are " a popular reconfiguration of the underclass". With media references spreading all around the country in all sorts of media vehicles like for instance Vicky Pollard from the BBC television series " Little Britain" played by the actor Matt Lucas. For some she is the perfect representation of a chav even though the character was created before the term became popular and for some others the popularity of such a character and culture is seen as becoming a serious problem in the country.

" Underclass damages behavioural terms in the long term and make use of crime and unemployment" (Charles Murray)

The underclass ' chavs' is a sub-culture that tries differentiates itself from the rest of society in a much similar way to the skinheads. The term is often seen as a point of pleasure and sometimes it doesn't mean that to be considered a ' chav' a person doesn't need to be relatively poor. Verity

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Jennings in her thesis affirm that “ people with money can choose how to live and how to dress” meaning that a very rich person, allocated in perhaps the highest tier of classes can perfectly fit into the ‘ chav’ description. But this particular kind of stereotyping has been defined as “ a new form of classicism or social racism”. Their conditions of reality are seen as self imposed and unjustified even though some argue that be a underclass ‘ chav’ is more than a culture, it is a lifestyle. The underclass ‘ chavs’ are seen as an inferior class that dare to skip cultural lines.

“ Chavs are often mentioned with regards to asbos and anti-social behaviour” (Verity Jennings- 2008)

They are mocked for their lack of cultural understanding and manners. Undertones of snobbery and stereotypes are still dominant in every discussion regarding the new underclass ‘ chavs’. The stereotype that follows is almost considered standard being easily spotted anywhere in the country as they made excessive use of branded sportswear, jewellery and also a unique hair cut known as “ the council house facelift” or “ Croydon facelift” that consist of the hair scrapped back into an ultra tight bun. Once again Vicky Pollard comes as the best media representation of that stereotype because every time the character is on screen she is normally wearing a pink Kappa tracksuit, the excessive jewellery and the infamous hair cut. The emergence of the underclass ‘ chav’ culture brought to the spotlight the question of how modern society deals with the classes division even though in the UK politicians and the population are not comfortable discussing that specific subject. Some find that the underclass ‘ chavs’ are not a simple sub-culture like it was affirmed before, because unlike other sub-cultures such as <https://assignbuster.com/the-underclass-in-the-united-kingdom/>

the punk movement the underclass ‘ chavs’ has no link to any music genre whatsoever. In the United Kingdom they are present all over the country but cities like Manchester and Glasgow are well known for its high number of the so new underclass called ‘ chavs’.

People like, Dr. Neil Washbourne says that “ the label ‘ chav’ was in part a product of media concerns about anti-social behaviour in big cities.” Besides all the discussions around that not person from the underclass ‘ chav’ sub-culture has stepped out to represent the group what may indirectly prove that all the pride the some people show of being an underclass ‘ chav’ is still part of a minority. Some may affirm that Britain has created a new generation of underclass who is unteachable and unemployable, seen sometimes as “ idle thieving bastards”. That is due to an increase on the amount of young people who grew up during the 80’s by single parents that now don’t have any perspective in their lives, have no work ethics, little social skills and are the reason for the increase of crime rates, the rise in divorce , the decline in marriage and the rise in cohabitation.

“ They are not doing anything productive and are costing taxpayers a fortune. It is very difficult to take these people now and provide basic social and work ethic skills” (Ralph Surman)

Never in the United Kingdom’s recent history the unemployment rate among the young population has increased almost in 50% and that has caused debates among politicians that interpret those number and those facts as an evidence of the problem that the education system in this country is facing. And as usual some blame the underclass for that. Over the internet there are

hundreds of web pages dedicated to either people who identify or disapprove the underclass 'chav' sub-culture and that also might bring the question that 'to what extent is the underclass in the UK socially stigmatised?' Observers hold some opinions where they see the underclass 'chavs' as a threatening to moral and social order, taking a look on media vehicles such as newspapers, television and also on the streets in the big capitals around the country, it is easy to notice that the underclass 'chav' carry with them a pretty much bad stigma. Most of the population that fits in the higher tiers of society have the notion that all the underclass population live a lazy leeching life style.

“ Underclass posed interesting problems for social citizenship” (Ralf Dahrendorf) Therefore, it is pretty obvious how bad is the stigma that the underclass have in the United Kingdom. With some politicians saying that the term 'chav' demonises young people and is damaging to the culture. There are many reasons to confirm that the new underclass 'chavs' are seen as a problem because the mainstream population in the United Kingdom wishes for a civilised, tolerant and peaceful society. The underclass 'chavs' can be very intolerant towards other sub-cultures , they tend to be bullies and violent for no apparent reason. During research, it was possible to have a deeper look into the underclass 'chav' culture, the 8 hours spent it was more than helpful because it was easy to spot every single aspect of the culture cited above. The fashion, the jewellery, the slang language, the tasteless life style and all around them are all individual choices, and it is their choice to be associated with violence and all the bad stigmas. They give a hostile look to others member of the community that perhaps are

considered the 'normal', so therefore it was possible to confirm that they see themselves as 'normal' as well even when it is more than obvious that most people around the country shows the disapproval towards the underclass 'chav' bringing up again Vicky Pollard the character from Little Britain that is popular for mocking the sub-culture, exaggerating all the bad aspects. It is almost possible to define the underclass 'chav' a sort of religion, because all the life style and choices are passed from the parents to the children, like in religion when all the beliefs are passed from generations to generations. The underclass 'chavs' are used as an example when an individual lack of education and lack a desire for a better life.

The main point of that paper has been to discuss how and why the underclass 'chav' culture/identity has got so much attention at a particular historical moment in the United Kingdom by looking the impact and reactions over elements of popular culture and how these impacts and reactions have allowed the culture/identity develop within the society making other anxieties to be heard. The purpose of the research was to show how the proliferation of information in a media saturated British culture has allowed the new underclass definition become a type of identity and culture to be defined as 'chav'. To give this paper the kind of complexity that requires to give an easy understanding of the cultural process it is necessary to let the term speak for 'itself' and to take a conclusion about this identity's future in a country where tier of classes seems to be important but most people don't talk about it.

The mainstream population or better said, the people in the higher tiers of classes consider that the white trainers, the excessive jewellery and the

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branded sportswear of the underclass ‘ chavs’ may be quite ostentatious and perhaps a way to make fun of themselves and their own culture. To think that you are better than somebody else based purely on your economic and social status is perhaps a little bit old fashion for a globalising world in which cultural borders are changing on a daily basis and becoming ever more spongy in a way and values are much less persuasive than used to be. It is obvious that the English economic resources are shrinking into a small part of society. In a capitalist world it is the ‘ survival of the fittest’ and climbing the ladder to the top becomes more transparent for some.

“ As this dream is clearly unattainable yet pervasively pursued through the media, the next best thing is to mock it and those that still hold faith in it”.  
(Callinicos, 1994)

For instance, let’s take a look at the Beckham’s. They have been crowned the ultimate celebrity underclass ‘ chavs’ because of their shameless life style and acquisition of copious amounts of money. The large number of sponsorship deals, the staged photographs and occasions, the constant hair style changing and media hype around the whole Beckham clan seem almost unbelievable in a world ever more aware of poverty and wars. If that life style is seen as acceptable by the elite why should be seen as a reason to make fun of it or even wrong for those ones at the bottom of the tier of classes in Britain whether it is imitation or real. So, perhaps for that reason we are starting to see more often ‘ positive’ representations of the underclass ‘ chavs’ on main media vehicles such as the Manchester family in the television production Shameless showed on the channel C4 who may have no money, steal to survive, despise conventional authority but are

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united as a family what some see as one of the few or even only positive side of the underclass culture. They might live a life the most people disagree but they are very much faithful to their families roots. In a perhaps not common way there is something honest about their dishonesty, more realistic rather than dramatized and staged, truthful rather than false if compared to the Beckham's and inc. Some might suggest that the underclass 'chav' culture/identity has emerged in recent years as both a celebration and reaction of the superficial and shallow aspects of the media frenzy that has expanded so rapidly in Britain. Celebrities such as 'Posh Spice' aka Victoria Beckham and Jordan aka Katie Price are an almost entities that were pretty much created by the media to be used and explored in its maximum.

“ They may be photographic for certain media outlets but for others the 'celebrity' chav, as with Jordan, is constructed as anti-woman. Just as it is virtually impossible to achieve the American dream so to it is impossible to achieve this types of body. The fake plastic breasts and collagen stuffed lips are a residual throwback to the Hollywood glamour and American dream that money can buy success in anything”. (Rojak, 2001)

To conclude, a few extravagant pieces of jewellery made of gold, it doesn't matter if it is real or not on the fingers of a teenager in a shopping centre do not make them the kind of person you avoid or even a bad person but when taken out of context by some member of the media e mostly by member of the political class of Britain and placed in strange categories by others in an attempt to make them feel bad about themselves and create new categories of information to consume they can. Nowadays they are called underclass '

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chavs' also known as scallies, Ned's, Townies, smicks, spides, moakes among many other definitions. As the time goes by more definitions are created to define the underclass. There is even a definition for the underclass person who live in a rural area, the ' SHAV'. Britain seems to be entering a new stage where information consumed by the mass are recycled and reinvented at every opportunity. If a new social mobility phenomenon will happen in Britain only time will tell and then will be possible to see how the government and the mainstream population will define the new tier of classes and break into more categories but until then the underclass in the United Kingdom is perhaps the one with more bad stigmas around Europe being compared to the gypsies in East Europe.