

Split

'More than a decade after the financial crisis, *Split* is a timely reminder of the most important divide that runs through the global economy, and how working people can organise to take back control of their lives. Clearly-argued, incisive and accessible, this book should be required reading for activists everywhere.'

Grace Blakeley, author of *Stolen: How to Save the World from Financialisation*

'This book is essential reading for making sense of society, digging into the realities of class for young people today. It shows how deeply Britain is shaped by class, while also charting out ways people can collectively change this.'

Jamie Woodcock, co-author of *The Gig Economy: A Critical Introduction*

'Neoliberal ideology hinges on the claim that class no longer matters – but as inequalities rise to unprecedented extremes, class divisions are now more prominent than ever. *Split* is packed with fresh insights into how class structures our world, and what we can do to build a fairer economy.'

Jason Hickel, author of *The Divide: Global Inequality from Conquest to Free Markets*

'*Split* is an essential introduction to the dimensions of class division that have shaped the modern world. If you want to understand why society has become ever more polarised, and how we might go about fixing it, read this book.'

Laurie Macfarlane, Economics Editor at openDemocracy and co-author of *Rethinking the Economics of Land and Housing*

'Intelligent, lucid and engaging from beginning to end, Tippet's book is a must-read for those who want to learn the root cause of pervasive inequality that defines our world.'

Brett Scott, author of *The Heretic's Guide to Global Finance: Hacking the Future of Money*

Split

Class Divides Uncovered

Ben Tippet

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Introduction: Class is a lucrative British export

Britain is famed for its rigid class hierarchies. From mustachioed gentlemen with stiff upper lips to industrial workers with dirty overalls and parochial accents, the British class system has been neatly stereotyped and typecast into the national story. This rosy and nostalgic picture of class relations has been retold to the world for over a hundred years.

At the time of writing, the most expensive TV show ever made is *The Crown*, a ten-part Netflix drama detailing the customs, relationships and power battles in the highest echelons of Britain's class system. The series focuses almost exclusively on the lives of the Royal Family and elite politicians, who exist in a separate world to the rest of society. In the words of the late Harry Leslie-Smith, Second World War veteran and international Twitter star, '*The Crown* is like an expensive painting in which the only subjects in focus are the rich and privileged.'

The director of *The Crown*, Stephen Daldry, seems less captivated with the glittering allure of royalty, and more with a romantic representation of the British class system, having directed another famous drama, at the other end of the class ladder: *Billy Elliot*. The film recounts the story of a young working-class boy who aspires to become a ballet dancer. Set in the north-east of England, against the backdrop of the 1984–5 miners' strike, it dramatises the hardship faced by coal miners

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in their struggle to defend their livelihoods. The strike was a watershed moment in British class history, due to both its size (it was the country's largest strike since 1926, involving over 142,000 mineworkers) and the long lasting impact it has had on working class political power.¹ The historic importance of the dispute is captured in a poignant scene towards the end of the film. Billy Elliot's father, Jackie, is a single parent and a coal miner out on strike. Having not earned an income for months, he is struggling to put food on the table, let alone pay for each of Billy's 50p ballet lessons. When Billy is accepted for an audition at the Royal Ballet School in London, but cannot afford the bus fare down, his father is forced to make a choice between his child's future and the struggle of his community.

In the end, Jackie breaks the strike. Returning to work, he is met by a crowd of strikers who have formed a picket line to keep the mine closed. In the crowd is Billy's older brother, Tony, who among the shouting and heckling of the crowd, spots his father trying to break the strike. Stunned and furious, he pushes over a police officer and chases after his dad, before shouting in desperation, 'You can't do this. Not now, not after all this time!' Jackie responds by falling to the floor, 'We're finished son.'

Audiences from around the world have an insatiable appetite for these romantic displays of Britain's class hierarchy. *The Crown* will be released on Netflix over the next decade, while *Billy Elliot* is now an on-stage musical, touring the world from Korea to the US. With *Downton Abbey*, *Victoria* and *Call the Midwife* as popular additions, class is a lucrative British export. These programmes have one thing in common: they represent a nostalgic vision of class from bygone and simpler times. This reflects the widespread belief that class is something of the past – that it doesn't

1 Jacobus Hermanus Antonius van der Velden, *Strikes Around the World, 1968–2005: Case-studies of 15 Countries* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

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neatly apply to the present or hold as an appropriate vision of the future. And even in those rare cases where class is used to explain some major political event (think Brexit or Trump), it is always based around the old stereotype of the working class as a white, male, industrial worker. To think seriously about class today we need to shake off this nostalgia. The best way to do this is to go back over recent history and ask why our understanding of class has not kept up with the times?

The new world order

After a year of strike action, the miners were defeated by Margaret Thatcher's government. The pits were closed down and whole communities were left without work. At its peak, half a million people worked in Britain's coal industry. Today there are almost none.² The closure of the coal mines was one part of an enormous restructuring of the whole of the UK economy. In what is now referred to as 'deindustrialisation', since 1985 nearly 2.5 million jobs in coal, steel, textiles, car and shipbuilding either disappeared or moved to countries in the Global South.³

The effect of this scale of job loss on the working classes in the UK was profound. Not only did it plunge families into poverty, but there was a huge rise in homelessness, addiction and long-term unemployment in these old industrial areas. Many of the communities have never recovered. The lack of investment, attention and care given is a deep wound in British history. And perhaps most importantly, deindustrialisation has seen the

2 Christina Beatty and Stephen Fothergill, *Jobs, Welfare and Austerity: how the destruction of industrial Britain casts a shadow over the present-day public finances*, project report (Sheffield: Centre for Regional, Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University, 2016).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

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demise of the power and influence of working class organisations, embodied most by the trade union movement. Following the defeat of the miners in 1984–5, trade union membership has been in terminal decline. In 1985, 45.3 per cent of the British workforce was in a trade union. Today, only 23 per cent are. The lack of union representation is particularly stark for the young, as less than 5 per cent of all trade union members are under 25, despite this group making up 14 per cent of all workers.⁴ When looking at it from the perspective of British trade unions, Jackie's 'We're finished son' reads like a collective epitaph.

These major economic changes did not just occur in the UK. Jobs throughout the Global North were either destroyed or relocated to countries in the Global South, where workers were paid less and placed under more exploitative working conditions. When we talk about this kind of scale of change, happening over decades, and involving billions of individual lives, it can be hard to imagine how our own individual lives and choices fit into the story. History is filled with these types of great transformations: from the collapse of Rome to the rise and fall of the British Empire. Within each of these eras, there exists a dominant ideology, or a set of ideas that govern us. These ideas, principles and values guide the common sense of the fundamental questions in life – how we should do politics, who should be doing it, and ultimately what it means to live a good life.

So, what is the name of the era we are living under now and what does that have to do with class? The period that was ushered in during the 1980s, and the one that still holds sway across the world today (albeit not without serious contestation) has a name: neo-liberalism. It has created the world today, including our nostalgic class visions. To really understand how

⁴ www.ft.com/content/3f6e9d7c-98bb-11e7-a652-cde3f882dd7b (last accessed 09/2019).

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and why, we have to get to grips with the key aspect of the ideology – the idea that society should be organised around individual competition.

Billy Elliot is at its heart a moral parable about neo-liberalism and the power of the competitive individual. At the end of the film (spoiler alert), Billy goes to his audition and successfully wins a place at the Royal Ballet School. He leaves the poverty and bitter industrial disputes of his working class community and moves to London, where he has the opportunity to start a new and better life for himself. The message is clear: those who have talent and work hard, no matter where they come from, can achieve their dreams and become successful individuals. To do this though, they must leave behind silly notions that they belong to a class, or that working together with other people from your class can improve things. Through individual competition, Billy succeeds. Through collective struggle, his community fails.

This idea that class does not matter anymore, that it does not fit with the times, is a central component of neo-liberalism. As the world changed, and the future was placed firmly in the hands of the individual, our understanding of class has not been updated. It's like the expression we say to children who are pulling funny faces – 'If the wind changes, it will stick like that'. With the changes of neo-liberalism, our collective understanding of class has remained stuck in the past, crystallised in the 80s.

Does class matter?

There is, however, a fundamental problem with neo-liberal ideology. Its central premise – that class doesn't really matter – is an illusion that does not hold up to serious interrogation. Just because we have not been talking about class, does not mean it

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has magically disappeared. Sure, the institutional power of the working class has diminished, but arguably this shows class has become more important – not less. As we shall see throughout this book, this is because class is like a see saw: the decline of working class power has been directly tied to the rising success of the other side of the coin: the elite class, or to give it another name, the capitalist class.

Part of the reason we do not talk about class as much as we used to is due to the success of neo-liberal ideology itself. The message that we get on in life through competition, and that class no longer matters, has itself been used as a tool by the elites to undermine the collective power of the working class.

To see how this works, consider the 2017 Oscar winning horror film, *Get Out* – a chilling satire about the underlying racism of a supposedly colour-blind liberal America. The story begins with a young happy couple in New York: Chris, a black photographer, is invited by his white girlfriend Rose to meet her parents at their country mansion for a weekend visit. Chris is initially concerned that her white parents will harbour racist views towards him, ‘Do they know I’m black?’, but his concerns are shrugged off by Rose, ‘No, should they? . . . my parents are not racist. My dad would have voted for Obama a third time if he could!’

Chris agrees to go, but after arriving at the isolated country house, strange things start to happen. While Rose and her parents continue to profess their colour blindness, Chris notices the signs of a clear and violent racial divide. Acting particularly strangely are the two black servants who work for the white family on the estate. Rose’s dad shrugs off the fact that he has black servants as an unfortunate coincidence, ‘I know it looks bad but . . .’ However, when Chris tries to make conversation, neither servant reacts, behaving instead like lobotomised, isolated robots. Similarly, at a party the next day,

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Chris approaches the only other black guest with a comradely, 'Good to see another brother around here', only to be greeted by a blank and unfriendly response. As the film develops (another spoiler alert!), we see that the family's attempt to pretend race no longer matters, despite its obvious presence, is actually a designed tactic by Rose and her family to ensnare Chris into a trap. Their real aim is to hypnotise him and transform him into another one of their helpers.

People may constantly claim that they don't see it, that it doesn't really exist (at least not anymore) and make excuses for its seemingly obvious effects. But as we can see from *Get Out*, this does not make the racial divide disappear, or make it safe for those at the sharp, receiving end of it. The image of a happy, post-racial family simply lures Chris into a situation where he is isolated and unable to communicate with those who might be able to help him, and who might be on his side.

This point is very similar for class under neo-liberalism: the constant repetition that 'class no longer matters' by elites has been used to undermine the collective power of the working class, or to draw the metaphor to its final conclusion – to individualise and lobotomise them for their own ends.

There are countless examples of how this is done. A common tactic straight out of the neo-liberal playbook is to get us all to see ourselves as competitive players in a system where we win or lose depending on how hard we work. A game where we are told to valorise the winners and judge those who will not or cannot compete and might therefore be skiving off the system. George Osborne, the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer and current Editor of the *Evening Standard*, summarised this tactic best in two lines he gave in a 2012 radio interview, justifying a fresh £10 billion round of cuts to the welfare budget: 'The rich will be asked to pay a greater share. But it is a "delusion" to think that taxes on

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the rich will solve the problem. It is unfair that people listening to this programme going out to work, see the neighbour next door with the blinds down because they are on benefits.⁵

The purpose of these messages is to turn people against each other – an age-old trick of divide and conquer for the twenty-first century. It does not matter if the blinds are down because your neighbour has been working a night shift. Osborne and his class can sit at home, behind their family-made curtains (Osborne's father is a leading retailer in the luxury fabric industry after all) in the safe knowledge that the anger and derision is not being turned against them.

Millennial socialism

The glistening sheen of neo-liberal ideology is starting to wear off. This started with the 2008 financial crisis, and the strange dissonant decade we have just lived through, full of electrifying political moments against the backdrop of a dull, sluggish economic 'recovery'. Class is coming back onto the agenda, as the divisions that have always been there are becoming harder to ignore.

You cannot talk about class and the economy without understanding some of the ideas of Karl Marx. Writing in the nineteenth century, his theories about class, power and capitalism have shaped the world more than any other thinker on the subject. As both an intellectual and a campaigner, Marx tried to understand how capitalism really works. For him, capitalism is an exploitative economic system that divides humans into classes based on their role in the economy. By their very defi-

⁵ From 2012 interview on the *Today* programme. www.theguardian.com/politics/blog/2012/oct/08/curtains-closed-blinds-down-george-osborne, (last accessed 09/2019).

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niton, the ruling classes, those that own and control property, are in unceasing conflict with the working classes, those that have to sell their labour for a wage. For Marx, this class conflict becomes a central and inescapable force of history. Whether we like it or not, class is something we are all shaped by.

For its critics, ‘Marxism’, ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ seems to occupy a contradictory position in the history of economic thought – his ideas being treated as both dangerously radical and historically outdated. Marx is a controversial figure. This is in part due to the cruelty and violence committed by people in his name, from the killing fields of the Cambodian Dictator Pol Pot, to the millions who died under Stalin’s totalitarian regime. A quick look at the history of Marxist thought shows that there is a strong democratic and pluralistic tradition that is not only deeply critical of these authoritarian turns, but which also has a wealth of knowledge to offer all of us that live under capitalism and feel the sharp forces of the class divide.

One group that clearly feel these forces is the young. Under the banner of ‘millennial socialism’, Marx and some of his ideas are having somewhat of a revival. In 2016 a YouGov poll found that young people in Britain between the ages of 18 to 24 were 18 per cent more likely to have a favourable rather than unfavourable view of socialism. When it came to their attitudes on capitalism, almost the complete opposite was true.⁶ While one poll at one point in time is not the most reliable source for gauging people’s opinions, this result has been repeated in polls of young people in wealthy capitalist countries across the world. In the US, a YouGov poll found that 18–29 year olds had a 43 per cent favourable opinion of socialism, compared to just 26 per

6 Will Dahlgreen, ‘British people keener on socialism than capitalism’, YouGov (2016) <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/02/23/british-people-view-socialism-more-favourably-capi> (last accessed 09/2019).

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cent that did not.⁷ In Australia, a right wing think tank commissioned a survey with YouGov Galaxy, and to their horror found that 58 per cent of millennials favoured socialism to capitalism, and 59 percent thought that ‘capitalism has failed and government should exercise more control of the economy’.⁸

Further polling also seems to suggest that a favourable attitude towards socialism is grounded in a desire to transform the economic structure of society. In the voting booths, the young seem attracted to parties that offer policies along more radical socialist lines. For example, in the UK 2017 general election, 66 per cent of 18–19 year olds voted for the Labour Party, which had just adopted a radical economic programme, while only 19 per cent of over 70 year olds pledged their support for Labour.⁹ If it were just the votes of the under 25s that counted in that election, the right wing Conservative Party would not have won a single seat.¹⁰

Young people are looking for transformative change. Throughout this book, we will see why, by telling the story of the economic reality many currently face. A Marxist analysis will not just help us understand how we got here, but also how progressive change can come about. As Marx said, ‘Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it’.

7 William Jordan, ‘Democrats more divided on socialism’, YouGov (2016) <https://today.yougov.com/topics/politics/articles-reports/2016/01/28/democrats-remain-divided-socialism> (last accessed 09/2019).

8 Tom Switzer and Charles Jacobs, *Millennials and socialism: Australian youth are lurching to the left* (The Centre for Independent Studies, Policy Paper 7, 2018).

9 Chris Curtis, ‘How Britain voted at the 2017 general election’, YouGov (2017) <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election> (last accessed 09/2019).

10 www.ft.com/content/cbed81fc-3b56-11e9-9988-28303f70fcff socialism (last accessed 09/2019).

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A bundle of sticks

Out of the vacuum of neo-liberalism, the right have spotted an opportunity. They have realised that working class voices have been forgotten, and are using a language of class to further their political project. Unlike the distinction between capital and labour discussed in this book, they claim that the real class divide is between a left-behind traditional working class, and the liberal metropolitan elite, who have betrayed them by throwing in their lot with immigrants and minority groups. It's a narrative that links straight back to our nostalgic image of class: a longing for a simple past where the working class is clearly defined as industrial, white men.

It is time to reclaim class. To do this we need to know how twenty-first century work, life and politics are defined by class division. Most crucially, we need to turn the neo-liberal theory of success on its head, and show that individual competition has not turned us into talented ballet dancers – if anything, it has turned us into lobotomised servants. To bring us out of the current crisis and on the road to individual and collective success, we need an organised, inclusive working class movement to take on the power of the wealthy elite. While the rich use their money to buy influence and fame, working class voices are best heard when spoken collectively and in solidarity with each other. This is an old and simple truth that goes back thousands of years and was put best in a famous fable from Aesop, an ancient Greek slave and one of history's greatest storytellers.

A long time ago, there was a father and his three quarrelling sons. As the man grew old and approached his last days, he ordered his sons to bring him a bundle of sticks so he could teach them a crucial lesson about life. Tying the bundle together, he asked each of his sons to break the sticks in two. None of

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them could do it. The old man then untied the bundle and asked again, this time holding each stick one at a time. Within a few moments, and without a single drop of sweat, every stick had been snapped. 'You see my point', said the Old Man. 'Individually, you are easy to break, but together you are invincible'.