

Institution: BRUNEL UNIVERSITY (H0113)
Unit of Assessment: 36 – Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management
Title of case study: The Condition of the Working Class: A theatre and documentary film project
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This unique theatrical and film project is based on the use of volunteers to produce work inspired by a combination of their own experiences of class and Friedrich Engels' book <i>The Condition of the Working Class in England</i>. It created significant impact for those taking part, offering beneficial new experiences of creative collaboration and association, authoring their own stories and developing fresh understandings of the wider context of their own individual experiences – a process unprecedented in mainstream media that constitutes a significant contribution to the documentary genre. This impact was, in turn, transmitted to wider civil society through live performance. Insights generated through the documentation and contextualisation of the process of theatrical production as a documentary film were then brought to a still broader range of audiences, including policy-makers at national level and into a larger arena of public discussion that challenged the widespread assumption that 'class' is no longer relevant to contemporary society.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>In 2012 Professor Michael Wayne received £17,617 from Brunel University's Knowledge Transfer Fund. This revenue stream, provided by the Higher Education Initiative Fund, is designed for projects that create a reciprocal transfer of knowledge between academia and civil society. This project was inspired by Friedrich Engels' book <i>The Condition of the Working Class in England</i> written in 1844. The research hypothesis of the project is that Engels' work retains strong relevance to contemporary social conditions where the supposed 'death of class' in public discourse and consciousness does not correlate with the deeper realities of social dislocation and cleavage in contemporary Britain. Class has very largely disappeared from the academic agenda while within the mainstream media it appears typically as desperately impoverished stereotypes. In particular, with the domination of the media by a professional middle class with increasingly attenuated connections to working people in a society where stratification is deepening, working class people have little chance to be agents in the process of representation. At the same time, with arts and community theatre suffering from cuts in grants that have accelerated with the onset of the 2007-8 economic crisis, the opportunities for working people to express themselves creatively and to be the authors of their own narratives, has dramatically decreased. The problem of cultural representation is symptomatic of the problem of political representation for working people with many commentators discussing the death of social democracy and representative politics.</p> <p>In order to a) demonstrate the research hypothesis concerning the contemporary relevance of Engels' analysis of how class shapes the everyday lives of working people, b) demonstrate the importance of working class people telling their own stories and c) demonstrate the critical/reflective benefits to well-being of artistic expression and creative collaboration, a unique film and theatre project was devised. An open call was issued for volunteers in Salford and Manchester to come together and produce a theatrical play based on their own classed experiences and Engels' 1844 text. No previous theatrical experience was necessary. The call attracted that strata of working class people that Gramsci would have called the 'organic intellectuals' – i.e. rooted in working class life but educated or self educated beyond the compulsory education system. The project was filmed by Wayne (and his co-director Deirdre O'Neill) and this provided the narrative backbone to a documentary film that charted the process of theatrical production and situated it within a wider historical and social context using archive footage and interviews with other Manchester and Salford people outside the theatre project. This research project constructed what Walter Benjamin would have called a 'constellation' between 1844 and today. This methodological strategy illuminates the continuing class-stratified nature of contemporary British society. Wayne and his co-director worked with an artistic director to develop</p>

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the play. Wayne & O'Neill ensured that the play developed within a framework inspired by the works of director/writers/theorists John McGrath and Augusto Boal. These practitioners were most appropriate given the working class and historical scope of the project. The originality of the documentary film that emerged from the theatre project is that it breaks from decades of documentary storytelling that speaks on behalf of working people. Instead the film allows working class people to tell their own stories, articulate their own experiences, recognise the legitimacy of their identities, recover their collective experience and memory from its marginalisation within the public sphere and engage in cultural production that fosters their creativity and imaginations. The film achieved these goals by its participatory-observational methodology, unique collaboration between film and theatre and subversion of the reality TV paradigm.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- 1) 'The Condition of the Working Class' – a 90 minute theatrical play performed at Salford Arts Theatre (2 nights), Nexus Café, Manchester (2 nights) and Calders Bookshop, London Waterloo (2 nights).
- 2) *The Condition of the Working Class* (Mike Wayne & Deirdre O'Neill, 82 minute) a documentary feature film.
- 3) 'The Condition of the Working Class: Representation and Praxis' in *Working USA, The Journal of Labour and Society* (forthcoming).

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

This research project had a positive and empowering impact on the diverse group of volunteers who participated in the theatrical production in terms of political consciousness and self-esteem, as demonstrated by their own comments both in the film and outside. Audiences for both the theatrical production and the documentary film also benefitted from an engagement with the question of class that challenged dominant conceptions and which enhanced their understanding of a major public issue at a time of considerable social dislocation, as evidenced in responses during screenings attended by the creators and comments posted on the film's website.

Fifteen volunteers participated in the theatrical project. They ranged from some in their teens to others in their 50s, which enabled the film to explore problems for working people that are recycled across the generations. Younger participants talk about how the project awoke an interest in political issues and how it provided them with a framework to understand things they only knew before somewhat inchoately or intuitively. The project helped place individual experiences in a wider class context, thus enhancing their knowledge of social and historical determinations. Older participants talk of having their political interests reawakened. In the documentary we see the participants telling their stories – literally to the rest of the group for the first time, then dramatising those stories in rehearsals and reflecting on these and how the process of production got them thinking about the significance of what happened in new ways. This *process* of production and reflection is critical to the impact of the film itself because audiences see the protagonists growing, learning and achieving something important about their lives.

The theatrical performances (six in three cities) had a major impact on the approximately 260 people who saw the shows, especially in Salford and Manchester. Audiences recorded their favourable responses in a comments book (pages of which can be found on the film website). Here is an indicative example: 'Great energy – sincerity & REAL – well done. Loved every second of it. It really makes you think.' The actress Sinead Cusack saw the play in London and described it as 'so moving and funny and politically smart... the sort of things that should be heard and seen on the stage'. The connection between Engels' text and the contemporary situation, the authenticity of the performances and the representation of class issues from a working class perspective, had a significant impact on audiences. They were intellectually stimulated and emotionally moved by the play.

The documentary film built upon the network of interest the theatrical performance had generated. It premiered at the Salford Arts Theatre (as the play had done) on April 5th 2013. The film was subsequently shown in museums, cafes, bookshops, theatres, community centres, independent

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cinemas and universities around the UK (and the Republic of Ireland). More than 30 screenings to both working and middle class audiences were organized between April-July 2013, viewed by more than 1,000 people. In this period the film sold 165 copies after screenings or from the film website while another 95 were sold via the retailers Bookmarks and Housemans. The film was sold by Bookmarks as part of a special offer with Ken Loach's film *Spirit of '45*, to which it was favourably compared in reviews and in post-screening Q&As.

Most of the screenings were attended by Wayne and his co-director, engaging audiences in discussions that increased the impact of the film as a stimulator of debate and dialogue about class and representation. Typically audiences spoke of how the film had 'fired' them up and how 'incredibly powerful' they found the film. They were also fascinated to learn about the unusual model that underpinned the making of the play.

The film focuses on the *process* of theatrical production and audiences appreciated and understood that this was a metaphor for what can be achieved by collective, collaborative work on the part of the working class. As one review put it: 'we see a sense of solidarity and understanding develop through the realisation of shared experiences and their common place in the class system. A hint of the strength that can come through collective organising can be seen' (Left Unity website). *Salford Online* described the film as 'a real history lesson and a true monument to Salford solidarity'. *The Salford Star* noted: 'the film shows...it's back to the days of Engels and poverty, with a bullet'. The film also made an intervention into the heart of the political establishment. Wayne and O'Neill published an article about the film in the Labour Party newspaper *Tribune*. On the invitation of Labour MP John McDonnell the film screened in the House of Commons on 11 June 2013. Referring to 'distortions' in our political system, McDonnell wrote: 'This film makes a significant contribution to tearing aside that veil of distortion and manipulation'. Labour MP and historian Tristram Hunt wrote in an email that the film 'made me think about some of Engels' work in a new way'. Trade unions recognised the relevance of its social and human rights agenda to their members: the Irish Congress of Trade Unions invited the film to be screened at their Festival of Ideas in June 2013 and the UK TUC screened the film at Congress House to approximately 160 people. The film also had an international reach – screening as part of the Workers Unite! Film Festival in New York and selling around the world, including Canada, America, Australia and Latin America. The depth of the film's impact on some audiences is recorded on the film's website. Working class audiences especially felt that the saliency of class as a lived experience had been given an all-too rare expression by the film.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 1) Video record of audience responses to the play: <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/the-play>
- 2) Written comments direct from the comment book in which audiences recorded their responses to the play: <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/the-comments-book>
- 3) Reviews of the play and interviews with both the directors of the project (Wayne and O'Neill) and the cast (including an interview with BBC Manchester) <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/press-2>
- 4) Article in *Tribune* by Wayne & O'Neill: <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/engels/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Tribune.pdf>
- 5) Reviews of the film in *Salford Star*, *Salford Online*, *Red Pepper*, *Socialist Review*, *Left Unity*, etc. <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/media>
- 6) Audience responses to the film: <http://www.conditionoftheworkingclass.info/media>