Abstract

Although the classed dimensions of ‘taste’ have, following Bourdieu, been widely discussed, expressions of disgust at perceived violations of taste have been less frequently considered in relation to class. This paper considers various expressions of disgust at white working-class existence and explores what they might tell us about middle-class identities and identifications. I argue that the narratives of decline and of lack present in such representations can be seen in terms of a long-standing middle-class project of distinguishing itself. Drawing on Bourdieu’s critique of Kantian aesthetics, I argue that the ownership of ‘taste’ is understood as reflecting true humanity, and as conferring uniqueness. Ironically, however, this uniqueness is only achieved through an incorporation of collective, classed understandings. The paper calls for a problematization of a normative and normalized middle-class location that is, I argue, given added legitimacy by a perceived decline in the significance of class itself.
Disgusted subjects: the making of middle-class identities

[A]n account of class, rank or social hierarchy must be thin indeed unless accompanied by an account of the passions and sentiments that sustain it (William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, p. 245).

Social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat (Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 479).

What we read as objective class divisions are produced and maintained by the middle class in the minutiae of everyday practice, as judgements of culture are put into effect (Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture*, p. 118).

Introduction

George Orwell, writing in the 1930s, famously declared ‘the real secret of class distinctions in the West’ to be summed up in ‘four frightful words’: ‘*The lower classes smell*’ (Orwell, 1975 [1937]: 112. Emphasis in original). What was at issue for Orwell was less literal smell (real or imagined) than what ‘smell’ signifies – the alterity, for the middle classes, of working-class existence. Orwell’s concern was with the ways in which the middle classes are disgusted (and can hardly help but be disgusted) at working-class existence. It is at the very core of their
subjectivity: their very selves are produced in opposition to 'the low' and the low cannot do anything but repulse them. This is not simply a matter of cognition but is bound up with middle-class identity: Orwell continues (in a phrase that prefigures Bourdieu's concept of the habitus): ‘The fact has got to be faced that to abolish class-distinctions means abolishing a part of yourself’ (Orwell, 1975 [1937]: 141).

This paper attempts to map some of the contemporary dimensions of the two axes of class relations highlighted in Orwell’s account – that is, the (negative) affective and cathectic aspects of class relations, and the implications of such aspects for middle-class identities and identifications. In it, I argue that, although Orwell’s analysis might reasonably be seen as dated, expressions of disgust at white working-class existence remain rife among middle-class commentators. Further, I argue that such expressions of disgust can tell us a great deal about the ways in which middle-classness relies on the expulsion and exclusion of (what is held to be) white working-classness. My focus is on the white working class because, in a racializing move which, one might say, 'hyper-whitens' them, there is, increasingly, an implicit coding of 'the working class' as white (Haylett, 2001; McRobbie, 2001)\(^1\). Of course, working-class people are not exclusively white, but their emblematic whiteness might be necessary to a continued disparagement\(^2\).

Class, in this context, is conceptualised as a dynamic process which is the site of political struggle, rather than as a set of static and empty positions waiting
to be filled by indicators such as employment and housing. It is the result of a historical process in which the bourgeoisie became a 'class for itself' through distinguishing itself from its twin others - the aristocracy and the poor (later to be designated 'the working class/es') (Finch, 1993). Although there have clearly been important social, economic and political changes in both working-class and middle-class life in all classed societies over the last one hundred or so years, my argument here focuses on the relational, rather than the substantive, manifestations of classed existence.

As I have indicated, my specific focus here is on the many expressions of disgust at white working-class existence within the British media and other public forums. These expressions – cutting across conventional Left/Right distinctions – have largely passed without comment. Perhaps they pass without notice. I will ask, why are white working-class people constituted as disgusting in their appearance, behaviour and taste? And what are the implications of such a coding for classed relations? While my focus is on the UK, there are indications that the argument has a broader purchase than this: in the USA, for example, 'white trash' has long been a label of disgust and contempt\(^3\). To illustrate my argument here, I will use representations from a range of sites - from journalism, popular writing and academic texts. These representations are not intended to stand as a representative sample, nor would I claim that this is the only way in which working-class people are represented\(^4\). Rather, what I am concerned with is what is respectably sayable within a given cultural formation; with what constitutes a
‘common understanding’ – in Bourdieu’s terms, the realm of the doxic. Although this cultural space is always contested and never fixed, I hope to show the ways in which it rests on a set of shared meanings about what working-class people are (and hence, what the middle classes are not, and could not be). That is, working class-ness forms the constitutive outside to middle-class existence. While classes are not homogeneous entities, I will argue that there is sufficient shared understanding among what we might call a public bourgeoisie (comprising academics, broadsheet journalists, social commentators and the like) about what working-class people are like to speak about a set of doxic constitutions of ‘the working class’. No doubt this is a specific class fraction - one with access to the means of representation - but precisely because of this access, it is an important and influential one. The issue here is not simply about middle-class people 'looking down on' working-class people. Such understandings work to produce working-class people as abhorrent and as foundationally 'other' to a middle-class existence that is silently marked as normal and desirable. But - and more fundamentally for my argument here - they also work to produce middle-classed identities that rely on not being the repellent and disgusting 'other'.

So, let me stress that the argument here is not about working-class people themselves, but about the ways in which they are described and their ‘problematic’ characteristics are rehearsed by middle-class people. As Skeggs (2004) points out, such representations have nothing to do with working-class people themselves, but they can tell us something about the ways in which
working-class people are othered and, hence, something about a normative and normalized middle-classness.

**Disgusting subjects: narratives of lack...**

If people are embarrassed and evasive when discussing class as a *system* (Savage *et al* 2001) there seems little embarrassment in characterizing white working-class *people* in the most horrific and disgusting terms. True, they are rarely *named* in class terms. But it is clear who the targets are, nevertheless. Let me begin this section by quoting one of many expressions of disgust, contempt and horror within broadsheet newspapers at a political protest in which white working-class people protested against child sex abusers being housed on their council (public ownership) housing estate:

There on TV were the mums (no dads) faces studded, shoulders tattooed, too-small pink singlets worn over shell-suit bottoms, pallid faces under peroxided hair telling tales of a diet of hamburgers, cigarettes and pesticides. And they’d taught their three-year-old kids (on whose behalf all this was supposedly being done) to chant slogans about hanging and killing. Paulsgrove Woman, I felt, was of an alien race to me. No wonder the BBC employed anthropologists with cut-glass accents to interpret these people
for the sake of their bemused viewers. Never had the social divide seemed so wide (Aaronovitch, 2000).

I have discussed this protest elsewhere (Lawler, 2002) and I will not rehearse the arguments again. What I do want to note is the way in which Aaronovitch assumes that the TV viewers will be ‘bemused’ by ‘Paulsgrove woman’ - that not only he but everyone finds her alien. This is a very common move in which a fictive ‘we’ is established that symbolically excludes anyone not middle-class. The women’s appearance is itself held to be disgusting, but also to signify a ‘deeper’, pathological and repellent subjectivity. What is more, what is acceptable in one setting (piercings and tattoos as an example of individual expression in the young middle class) is coded entirely differently here, where it is used to signify the reverse - a collective, even a mob-like, identity. The (classical) anthropologist’s gaze is repeatedly turned on white working-class people, such that they become the horrific and mystifying others. But it is an anthropological gaze with none of the respect that ‘the exotic’ might (however problematically) command (Back, 2002). This specular relation has a long history. Historically, the poor have long been associated with the material and the embodied (Bourdieu, 1986; Porter, 2003); the Cartesian mind/body split has not conferred the status of ‘pure mind’ on them. It is as if they are just too material. As we will see, this materiality has profound consequences in terms of a coding of the working class as repellent.
Bodies - their appearance, their bearing and their adornment - are central in representations of white working-class people. References to shell suits, or to 'large gold earrings [and] tightly-permed head' (Gillan, 12. 08.00) or to the 'Essex girl' whose 'big bottom is barely covered by a denim mini-skirt' (Greer, in Skeggs, 2003:2) do a great deal of work in coding a whole way of life that is deemed to be repellent. As with Orwell's account of the Brookers in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, the act of description itself seems enough to confer blame: 'mostly on then but also in part on the world that generates them' (Miller, 1997:244). In a kind of join-the-dots pathologization, the reader is left to fill in the picture by understanding that certain kinds of clothing, location, and bodily appearance indicate a deeper, underlying pathology, as in this extract from Mark Hudson's memoir, *Coming Up Brockens*, an account of his stay in a County Durham pit village:

[A] group of schoolgirls was approaching along the pavement. One of them, a tall, brawny girl with a shapeless mop of hair, was directly in my path. I caught her intent look. She imagined that finally, from some Pavlovian courtesy, I was going to make way for her.

No you don't, I thought. Not here. Not in this shithole.

At the last minute she leapt aside (Hudson, 1994: 16-17)

Here, as in other texts, the landscape is elided with a personal aesthetic to render its inhabitants horrific and pathological. This spatialization of class is, in many ways, consistent with the logic of class as classification itself, since, as
Walkerdine (2003) notes, from its Nineteenth Century beginnings, ‘class’ as a mode of classification was linked with the mapping of areas of cities in terms of disease and crime. This mapping, in turn, was linked with the classification of the inhabitants of such areas in terms of faulty psychologies which had to be described and ‘explained’. So, while this is not a new spatialization, it might be seen to be intensified with the advent of geodemographic software (Burrows and Ellison, 2004) and websites such as upmystreet.com which arguably lend a renewed ‘scientficity’ to the kind of folk knowledge which, in Britain, frequently signifies class in terms of geographical location (as in jokes about ‘Essex girls’ and ‘Scousers’, for example). More fundamentally, it might be seen to be intensified by a neo-liberal emphasis on self-improvement which eclipses any grammar of exploitation with the use of a language of individual psychology (Walkerdine, 2003), such that specific areas (cast as horrific or repulsive) come to be associated with populations that are similarly understood.

This is why both landscape and inhabitants are so frequently described in terms of lack. But this is not, primarily, a lack of material resources, but a lack of ‘taste’, knowledge, and the ‘right ways of being and doing’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 511). For Hudson, appearance and landscape combine in such a way that their (assumed) lack suggests a lack of humanity itself. Although he resists the worst excesses of narratives which posit a golden age, he still presents the white working-class people he observes as exotic specimens marked by a repulsiveness which means that they do not deserve the basic courtesy of
standing aside for them on a pavement. But, more than this, Hudson’s text conveys his evident astonishment and horror that there even exist landscapes like this, housing people like this.

I have pointed to the ways in which the appearance of both landscape and inhabitants acts as a marked of an assumed faulty psychology. But even when the appearance of working-class people is not explicitly invoked, the list of their 'faulty' character traits is endless. They are the young males who are 'weakly socialized and weakly socially controlled' (Halsey, 1992: xiv); In the 1970s, working-class women were 'notorious bingo-women who neglect their children' (Hopkins, 1974: 25), or the parents who use 'cuffs and blows' because they are 'less able to put their feelings into words' (Kellmer-Pringle, 1974: 50). Today they are summed up as fag-smoking teenage mothers, rearing children in 'deprived and arid backgrounds of instability, emotional chaos, parental strife, of moral vacuum' (Phillips, in Coward 1994), and whose children will grow up to be 'socially autistic adult[s] with little expectation and even less talent' (Odone, in McRobbie, 2001: 370). They are the 'new rabble' amongst whom criminality is rife, who abuse and neglect their children (Murray, 1994); the fatherless families who bring chaos to their localities and threaten the whole fabric of society (Dennis and Erdos, 1992). They suffer from a 'poverty of expectation and dedication' (Blunkett, in Carvel, 1998), or a lack of 'interest and support' (Milliband, 2003) which militates against their children's school success. They are over-fertile, vulgar, tasteless and out of control. Above all, they are held to lack everything perceived
as having value.

This constitution of working-class existence in terms of ‘lack’ is now so widespread as to be almost ubiquitous. It informs social policy (‘social exclusion’ presumes a deficit model, as do discussions of ‘widening participation’) and is present even in some (though by no means all) analyses which are sympathetic to working-class people. Simon Charlesworth’s (2000) account, for example, presents an unremitting picture of bleakness and emptiness, in which life often has literally no meaning. Similarly, Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World* (1999) conveys little but hopelessness. Is this about working-class life or about ‘a way of looking at it’? (Bourdieu, 2000: 53) It is clear that ‘misery’ is what Bourdieu and his team went looking for, and misery is what they found. While there is certainly no virtue in poverty, or indeed in being on the receiving end of the forms of cultural violence that Bourdieu and others have detailed, everything within these accounts is bleak. Yet as Angela McRobbie has argued, ‘even the poor and the dispossessed partake in some forms of cultural enjoyment which are collective resources which make people what they are’ (McRobbie, 2002: 136). Or, as Skeggs puts it, ‘working-class culture is not point zero of culture; rather, it has a different value system, one not recognized by the dominant symbolic economy’ (Skeggs, 2004: 153). While these alternative systems are occluded, there can only be lack: one effect of narratives of lack is that they rob the subjects of such narratives of any moral value. But this is given added momentum by an accompanying narrative of ‘decline’, discussed next.
Narratives of lack are frequently accompanied by implicit or explicit narratives of
decline, in which, the story goes, there was once a respectable working class
which held progressive principles and knew its assigned purpose (which, for the
Left at least, was to bring about social change). This class has now disappeared,
to be either absorbed into an allegedly-expanding middle class, or consigned to a
workless and workshy underclass which lacks taste, is politically retrogressive,
dresses badly, and above all, is prey to a consumer culture (from which the
middle classes are, presumably, immune). In such narratives, the decline of
heavy industry – often seen as emblematic of working-class existence - is linked
with a decline in the worth of the working class. Hudson, for example, going in
search of the family history of stories passed down to him, expresses bitter
resentment that the present reality does not map on to the place of his
imagination. Searching for the past of socialist and progressive solidarity of these
stories, he finds only an absence: ‘The old ways of resistance and communal
enterprise had gone leaving only a slavish acquiescence at the lowest level of
consumerism’ (Hudson, 1994: 79). Similarly, though in a more ambiguous vein,
the journalist, Deborah Orr hints at some of the complexities in her comment that,
"Working class" is no longer a term that can be qualified with the word
"respectable" because it is now almost always a subtly loaded insult'. She adds:

The term carries with it implications of the worst sort of conservative, retrogressive values, including bad food, bad taste and dreadful gender assumptions. You don't have to be comfortably off to be middle-class, you just need to subscribe to progressive attitudes (as the respectable working classes so recently did). Likewise, you don't have to be poor to be working class, just common (Orr, 2003)

If 'progressive attitudes' can only be espoused by the middle class, then the working class can only be understood as 'retrogressive'. But note how this retrogression rests, not only on (supposed) 'dreadful gender assumptions' but on eating bad food and having bad taste: in short, on being common.

The relatively recent discourse of 'underclass' does little to change the alterity of a group which are constituted on the basis of not being middle class. Bev Skeggs (2003) argues that the use of 'underclass' discourse maintains the old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor; but since 'working-class' no longer carries any positive valuation, and since in any case 'class' is rarely used to refer to the kinds of divisions that would once have been axiomatically marked as classed, I would contend that the slippage from working-class to 'underclass' works to drive out the notion of 'respectability' from the poor altogether.
It may be, however, that the discourse of underclass enables an easier disparagement of the contemporary working class. Since they are seen to have fallen from grace, there is an implication that they not only could but should be different. At the same time, the use of the term 'underclass' casts this group adrift from 'the proletariat', who were only ever of interest to the Left because of their assigned role in bringing about the revolution, but who have manifestly failed in their assigned task of becoming a 'class for itself'.

Femininity has a specific place in all this. Representations such as those outlined above, while not exclusively targeting women, have tended to focus on women as especially repellent objects. This has a long history: Finch (1993) has noted how a Nineteenth-Century line between the ‘rough’ and the ‘respectable’ working-class was primarily drawn on the bodies and behaviours of women and Skeggs’ 1997 study shows how little this has changed over more than a century. Since respectability is coded as an inherent feature of ‘proper’ femininity, working-class women must constantly guard against being dis-respectable, but no matter how carefully they do this, they are always at risk of being judged as wanting by middle-class observers. And this is a double jeopardy since if working-class women can be rendered disgusting by dis-respectability and excess, they have also been rendered comic or disgusting in their attempts to be respectable (the character of Hyacinth Bucket in Keeping Up Appearances being a prime example). In this, they have frequently been understood as inhibitors to the class struggle so that, as Walkerdine (writing here of the mid Twentieth Century) points
out, there ‘was a clear implication that working-class men were the carriers of resistance and radicality, with women often being understood as a conservative force’ (Walkerdine, 2003: 237).

But at a time when resistance and radicality are no longer associated with proletarian existence, the slippage from ‘working-class’ to ‘underclass’ can be seen as a feminizing move. Without an assumed radicality projected on to male manual workers, what is left for the middle-class observer to admire? Public discourse appears to have moved from a focus on a masculinized proletariat (the ‘noble worker’ narrative) to a feminized underclass (the ‘fag-smoking teenage mother’ narrative). The working class /underclass is cast as ‘feminine’ by being seen as workless (paid work being erroneously linked with masculinity) (Murray 1994) and by a focus on bodily appearance and on reproductive behaviour. This, I’d argue, is why there is such an emphasis on women’s bodies and behaviour in ‘disgusted’ representations of working-class existence. But while working-classness might be seen as newly feminized, it is not that ‘the feminine’ has become newly problematic in relation to class (it has always been so).

This begins to point to some of the ways in which ‘decline’ narratives are curiously ahistorical. Only a minority of members of the working class were ever able to claim any form of identity as ‘noble worker’. This designation was rarely available to women: Skeggs (1997) rightly points out that there is little that is ‘noble’ in the caring work in which many working-class women are engaged. But, more generally, nor does it seem to have been applied to the many working-class
women and men engaged in shop work, domestic service, light factory work and
the like. Moreover, while participation in certain forms of manual labour was able
to be mobilized as a positive and worthwhile *self-identity* for some working-class
men (Savage *et al* 2001), it would be mistaken to take this to indicate a positively-
evaluated *conferred identity*. It does not follow from a sense of pride in oneself
and one’s labour that one will be evaluated in positive terms by others.

Indeed, there is plenty of evidence that a middle-class coding of ‘disgusting’
to mark working class people – both women and men - is one that has long
existed. While ‘the working class’ in the abstract may have been admired by
middle-class socialists, working class *people* seem to have been a different
matter. To take just some examples: Finch (1993) and Stallybrass and White
(1986) have documented expressions of bourgeois disgust at working-class
people in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. And Ian Roberts (1999)
has analysed the many expressions of disgust and abhorrence at working class
people within post-war community studies - in which an avowed ‘objectivity’ does
not prevent working-class people being cast as immoral, lying, unable to bring up
their children and suffering from a psychic deficiency - either on the basis of what
they looked like or because of their unwillingness to concur with the judgements
of middle-class observers⁹.

It seems that working-class people have always represented what is most
troubling in the body politic. In Nineteenth Century Britain and the USA, when
white racial ‘purity’ was emphasized, the white working class were continually
condemned through suggestions of racial 'impurity' - they were not white enough (Young, 1995; English, 1999). Now that there is at least lip-service paid to racial 'diversity', and perhaps a recognition that 'whiteness' itself might be troublesome, the working class becomes too white, embodying a racism that is officially condemned\(^{10}\) (Haylett, 2001). Similarly, working-class people in the Nineteenth Century and the first part of the Twentieth Century were condemned for their violation of rigid gender norms (Finch, 1993; Roberts, 1999). Today, although they are still characterized as over-sexual and over-fertile, they are seen as embracing archaic and overly rigid gender relations - Orr's 'dreadful gender assumptions' (see Lawler, 2000). For about 150 years, ethical and intellectual justifications for middle-class disgust at working-class existence have sat side by side, forming a neat boundary which precludes any middle-class questioning of their own position.

What has changed in recent years is less the sentiments than the explicit naming of class as such. 'Class' is rarely explicitly invoked in contemporary expressions of disgust: instead, the 'disgusting' traits are presented as the outcome of individual and familial pathology. Representations of working-class people are marked by disapproval or disdain, not for the 'objective' markers of their position, but for (what are perceived to be) their identities. Everything is saturated with meaning: their clothes, their bodies, their houses, all are assumed to be markers of some 'deeper', pathological form of identity. This identity is taken to be ignorant, brutal and tasteless. As in eugenically-inspired (often retouched)
photographs popular at the turn of the Twentieth Century (English, 1999) white working-class people’s actions and appearance are made to *mean*: they are made to indicate signs of ignorance, stupidity, tastelessness. An assumed ignorance and immorality is read off from an aesthetic which is constituted as faulty.

Contemporary ‘postmodern’ self-awareness does little to undo this. Boyne (2002) argues that ‘expressions of class cultures are much more marked by reflexive attitudes - ‘rueful, ironic, envious, reflectively proud’ - than was the case in the picture painted by Bourdieu in 1979’ (Boyne, 2002: 119). It is true that *some* (by no means all) of the representations discussed here are marked by a knowingness, a kind of ironic distancing. But is this reflexivity, or merely the latest, postmodernism-inflected ‘style’ of disparaging working-class people? Does the knowing smile really undo or undermine symbolic violence? For Skeggs, ‘Ironic enables the abdication of responsibility for the description while reproducing the historical stereotypes intact’ (2003: 17). We might ask what the political implications of such ironizing (insofar as it exists) might be, when it works to make present forms of identity and inequality that are officially shunned.¹¹

When class is either written out of the analysis altogether, or ‘relegated’ to being a minor player in a multiplicity of identities, it is irony that may bridge the gap between repudiating the *idea* of class, while simultaneously representing working-class people as disgusting and repellent. This does not necessarily entail any of the self-scrutiny and self-awareness normally associated with reflexivity. Indeed, contemporary ‘public’ representations seem to be marked by
a notable lack of reflexivity, and there is virtually no real problematization of a normative and normalized middle-classed position. We might ask, then, how white working-class subjects come to be marked as so ‘disgusting’.

**Disgusted subjects**

Disgust is an under-explored emotion (Dollimore, 2001), and this is especially true of classed disgust. While the classed dimensions of ‘taste’ have been widely discussed, little attention has been given to the disgust that is aroused when ‘good’ taste is seen to violated. Yet disgust is an immensely powerful indicator of the interface between the personal and the social. The experience of disgust indicates par excellence that one is ‘in the grip of a norm whose violation we are witnessing or imagining’ (Miller, 1997: 194) and this grip is immediately felt within the body - it ‘makes one sick’ or ‘makes one vomit’ as Bourdieu (1986: 486) says. Feeling so personal, so visceral, it nevertheless invokes collective sentiments. It relies on an affirmation that ‘we are not alone in our relation to the disgusting object’ (Probyn, 2000: 131).

Disgust is a powerful emotion: involved in the work of drawing distinctions, it indicates that the drawing of such distinctions is laden with (negative) affect. As William Miller notes:
Disgust, along with contempt, as well as other emotions in various settings, recognizes and maintains difference. Disgust helps define boundaries between us and them, me and you. It helps prevent our way from being subsumed into their way (Miller, 1997: 50)

Space does not permit a discussion of the various ways in which disgust has been theorized; but psychoanalytic and structuralist accounts alike have posited disgust, not as intrinsic to the ‘disgusting’ object, but as inhering in the relationship between the disgusted and the object of disgust. Further, these accounts share an emphasis on an ontological grounding to disgust: part of who we are relies on not being (or liking) the disgusting object. However, in this section, I want to consider a somewhat different, and specifically classed, perspective on disgust – or, more specifically, on the aesthetic that forms disgust’s ‘other’. I want to turn to Bourdieu’s brief analysis of Kant’s Critique of Judgement, - a text which he says is ‘rightly regarded as the very symbol of philosophical distinction’ (Bourdieu, 1986: 500) and which he suggests underwrites contemporary Euroamerican understandings of aesthetics and of taste. Bourdieu attempts to uncover the social relationships which both inform this work and have been informed by it.

In relation to judgements of taste, Kant’s problematic (the mirror image of Bourdieu’s own) is this:

How, if at all, is it possible to judge something … as beautiful on the basis
of something very subjective, a feeling of pleasure, and yet demand for our judgement a universal assent? That we do demand such assent is implicit in the very fact that we use the predicate 'beautiful' as if beauty were a property of things (which everyone ought to see) (Pluhar, 1987: xlvii, Emphasis in original).

The answer is an appeal to a common humanity, a common aesthetic. Yet clearly not everyone shares such an aesthetic. Those 'who have no feeling for beautiful nature', preferring 'mere sense' to be got from eating and drinking, are regarded as 'coarse and ignoble' (Kant, 1987 [1790]:169-70). This, for Bourdieu, is the claiming of a 'monopoly on humanity': it is a means by which the properly human is marked out by its innate ability to appreciate beauty (to have 'taste'): conversely, those lacking this property are lacking in humanity, if not non-human.

Yet this marking is simply the result of the universalizing of a disposition which belongs to a specific location (cf. Haraway, 1991). The language of 'ought' or 'must' (Sollen\(^{15}\)) makes this disposition an imperative, or 'that sort of spurious constative which allows the author to remain silent as to the conditions of realization of what is in fact a performative utterance' (Bourdieu, 1986: 488-9).

It is this performative aspect that is, I think, at the heart of Bourdieu's critique. Kantian aesthetics is not simply about philosophical distinction, but brings into effect what it names – that is, a social authorization of an aesthetics in which 'taste' becomes a feature of an asocial and ahistorical 'human nature'.
Within this aesthetics, the truly ‘beautiful’ is distinguished from the sensually ‘pleasing’ on the basis of a mind (or soul)/body dichotomy. Unlike the facile pleasures of the flesh which anyone might enjoy, appreciation of beauty is held to demand a transcendence of the body that only some (those who are able to realize their ‘human nature’) can attain. This dichotomy having been made, deviations from the properly tasteful (defined as an ability to appreciate ‘true beauty’) are made by definition facile, easy. Such deviations can be seen as a facile aesthetic, giving in to sensual pleasures rather than transcending them. While for Kant this is a slippage from, or betrayal of, ‘human nature’, for Bourdieu it is an effect of social relations in which the middle classes have the authority to make their definitions work. What gets to count as ‘tasteful’ is effected by those with the social power to name. It is possible to see, then, how definitions of aesthetics (and their appreciation) become mapped on to broader classed relations.

Once an aesthetic is established as ‘tasteful’ those who fail to appreciate it can be robbed of any moral worth. This is because there is a slippage between ‘facile’ in terms of aesthetic dispositions and (morally) ‘easy’. Those endowed with this appreciation are able to legitimately claim a place as ‘properly human’, while those who are seen as unable to appreciate what they ought to appreciate are rendered disgusting. That they are represented as disgusting rather than merely ‘common’ indicates the degree to which they must be ‘pushed away’ – expelled from a normative and normalized middle-classness. Disgust hinges on
proximity (Miller, 1997; Probyn, 2000; Skeggs, 2004). When legal barriers between classes get broken down, as in democracy, social hierarchy must be maintained in other ways: so, as Miller argues:

[I]t was the advent of democratic principles that finally made ill manners and vulgarity not just a source of comedy but of terror and threat to those above. And that's when the working class began to reek seriously, either of filth or of cologne (Miller, 1997: 253-4).

In other words, ‘the lower classes smell’ because their (literal and metaphorical) smell is held to signal a dangerous proximity, which must then be guarded against, since to do otherwise would be to threaten the stability of middle-class claims on respectability (Skeggs, 2004). These forms of distinction are not ‘second order’ moral sentiments related only contingently to class (Sayer, 2002) nor are they concerned with an identity unrelated to class (Coole, 1996). Rather, they are at the very heart of an identity and a subjectivity which is classed. Unconsciously incorporated, less through a dynamic repression than through a generative ‘forgetting’ of the minutiae of social training, a classed relation to the aesthetic /the disgusting is, for Bourdieu, at the heart of our being. Such a hold on ‘taste’ is not innate but an effect of unequal social and cultural processes. But the irony is that Kantian aesthetics obscures its collective and classed basis through its emphasis on a unique individualism.
The one and the many

There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses (Raymond Williams, ‘The masses’, p. 46).

Bourdieu argues that Kantian aesthetics rests on a specific kind of distinction; a form of individualism that marks out the bearer of taste as unique at the same time that s/he participates in a shared understanding of what taste is. Like the Heideggerian Das Ein, it designates a subject who has 'risen above' the facile, the easy, the mass. We see here a form of individualism which divides the world into, on the one hand, a teeming mass and, against this, a class of people differentiated from the mass by virtue of being differentiated from each other.

If the ownership of ‘taste’ marks out a uniqueness, then it is easy to see how taste as such can displace class as an explanatory schema: if taste is about individual characteristics, and, furthermore, if its possession confers individuality, then any kind of collective, political explanation is written out. What is obscured here is the ways in which such a schema relies on collective, class politics. It derives, Bourdieu suggests, from an emergent bourgeoisie's attempts to claim 'culture' for itself, and, in the process, to distinguish itself from its twin 'others' - the people and the Court, representing, respectively, 'nature' and civilization. 'Civilization', for Kant, brings an alienation from nature, while 'the people' are too
much immersed in nature. Those who are truly cultured eschew both alienation and immersion. This historical legacy is alive today in a continual iteration of class distinctions.

So, for Bourdieu, Kant’s principle of ‘pure taste’ is a means by which the middle classes distinguish themselves. Its other - lack of taste - invokes a disgust which is projected on to their others. These groups - but especially the working class, who are the subject of most attention, and for whom, in any case, such cultural domination matters - are understood in terms of a 'massification'. There is a fundamental opposition, argues Bourdieu, 'between the 'elite' of the dominant and the 'mass' of the dominated, a contingent, disorganized multiplicity, interchangeable and innumerable, existing only statistically' (1986: 468). Being constituted as a 'mass', they become the antithesis of individuality, threatening 'to swamp individual thinking and feeling' (Williams, 1958: 44).

Indeed, they could hardly be so readily knowable through their appearance, or signified in terms of a few easy signifiers (bad clothes, bad food, bad taste) if they were not understood in terms of a 'mass'. And the mass, Raymond Williams argues, is the successor to 'the mob' - child-like, savage and primitive (le Bon, 1896: see Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001). Aesthetics has become translated into morality. As noted above, there is an elision between 'facile' in the aesthetic sense and 'easy' in the moral sense, so that those positioned as lacking 'taste' can also be positioned as morally lacking. In this way, philosophical definitions of aesthetics and taste become combined with
political concerns about the problem of order, the governance of populations, and the relations between state and citizen.

This is precisely why working-class people are so readily judged by their appearance: because a facile aesthetic is read in terms of an 'easy' morality. Further, because everyone ought to have bourgeois taste, there is an assumption that those who are seen as lacking this taste must either not know any better, or must perversely lack the desire to become different. There is an assumption, in other words, that working-class people should cease to show the signs of working-classness. The irony here is that, when working class people do show signs of embourgeoisement, they can also be condemned for that (Roberts, 1999) or ridiculed as 'pretentious'. Indeed, in a sense it matters little what working-class people actually do since their role is to act as a foil: a 'negative reference point, in relation to which all aesthetics define themselves, by successive negations' (Bourdieu, 1986: 57). Taste may be unstable but this does not erase its classed relationality. Witness the ways in which middle class taste shifts in the face of popularization and mass-consumption.

Working-class people, in this context, become little more than personae in a bourgeois drama. As the other, they are assumed to be knowable (Spivak, 1997) and their subjectivities are assumed to be knowable through their appearance (Skeggs, 1997). Their point, within this imaginary, is to be what the middle classes are not, could not possibly be, must defend against being, but on whom the projected fantasies of the middle class must come to rest.
But if 'the masses' are necessary, they are not only disgusting, but frightening and threatening. They form the 'perpetual threat to culture' (Williams, 1958: 44). For Bourdieu, a whole network of cultural oppositions (between high and low, brilliant and dull, unique and common, and so on) entails an apocalyptic fear, for the middle classes, of being engulfed or swamped by an undifferentiated mass - a mass which lacks the singularity and individuality accorded to the elite. Themes of 'levelling' and 'trivialization' betray 'an obsessive fear of number, of undifferentiated hordes indifferent to difference and constantly threatening to submerge the private spaces of bourgeois exclusiveness' (1986: 469).

What is implied here is a recognition of (and horror at) sameness - that one could be like all those who lack 'taste', that one could be otherwise. This is the other side to a classification of taste in terms of personal characteristics: if those who lack taste could (and should) be otherwise, then those who (are seen to) have taste could, similarly, be otherwise. Hence, this sameness must be defended against in the form of barriers between classes. I have argued here that one such barrier is 'taste', frequently manifest in its other, disgust, but in a sense this is arbitrary: the point is that it is part of a long-standing middle-class project to distinguish itself as different. In relating the disgusting-ness of working-class existence, the story being told is that of middle-class distinction. And this story is built on a collective history: the 'I am I' of bourgeois reflexive individualism (Giddens, 1994) both disguises, and rests on, the 'We are not them' of middle-class identity-making.
Conclusion: the sour smell of distinction?

Like the Freudian ‘uncanny’ or Simmel's 'trader' (Clarke, 2003) the working class has become, for the middle class, a group both familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown. No longer confined to the slums of the inner cities (cf. Finch, 1993), they are both horrifically near and intriguingly distant: present in middle-class homes virtually through 'reality-TV' programmes that hold them up to (middle-class) public humiliation, or actually, as domestic servants, they are held to be knowable through signifiers of their massification. At the same time this very massification renders them both other and unknowable.

I have argued throughout this paper that disgust is one manifestation of a bourgeois project to distinguish the middle class from its others, a means of self-constitution. If this suggests an anxious and defensive bourgeois subject, this should not be taken in turn to suggest that the power relations embedded here are weak. On the contrary, an entire social and cultural system works to continue the constitution of white working-class people as entirely devoid of value and worth (Skeggs, 2004). This is why Miller's solution to middle-class disgust seems unconvincing. Miller argues for a kind of democratizing of disgust and contempt: 'The battle is to have the high come to recognize the contemptible figure they cut before the low' (Miller, 1997: 236). But the problem here is that working-class disgust and contempt for the middle class simply does not count: working-class people lack the social authority to make their judgements stick. As Kathryn
Abrams comments, ‘a war of disgusts is one that those less socially privileged are unlikely to win’ (Abrams, 2002: 1454).

Middle-class approaches to working-class existence have tended to veer between disgust and romanticism. At the moment, it seems that disgust is winning out, but let me stress I am not advocating a return to romanticism. Recent work on working-class existence, largely written by writers who are themselves from working-class backgrounds, indicates that it is possible to analyse working-class life without recourse to either romanticism or pathologization. While to adequately summarize this rich and diverse work would require an article of its own\(^\text{19}\), it is worth noting that the work is characterized by a refusal of the historical legacy within which working-class people have been forced to account for themselves in narratives and ways of understanding that are imposed on them by middle-class observers.

My concern here, however, has been to try to contribute to this debate by shifting the focus to middle-class existence and by attempting to problematize the normalcy of middle-classness. Just as challenges have been mounted to the silent normalization of such privileged positions as whiteness, heterosexuality and masculinity, it is important to challenge and to go on challenging the assumption that middle-class dispositions, tastes and bodies are, by definition, the ‘right’ ones. It is important, in other words, to challenge an unmarked and unproblematized middle classness which claims a monopoly on ‘true humanity’.
Acknowledgements
Thanks to the three anonymous referees and to Nick Ellison, Mariam Fraser, Steve Fuller, Becca Hazleden, Paul Johnson and Robin Williams, who patiently commented on earlier drafts of this paper.

As I discuss later, they might also be seen (though I think to a lesser degree) as feminized.

And as Angela McRobbie (2001) argues, if we return race to representations of working-class people (so that we are considering some people who are also Black) then the full force of comments made by even ‘liberal’ observers becomes much more apparent.

and indeed has recently been reclaimed as a source of political and academic engagement and rethinking. See Wray and Newitz, 1997.

Certainly, white working-class people themselves do not occupy an ‘innocent’ position in all this: there are public forums which allow for expressions of working-class disgust and contempt at middle-class existence. But my contention here is that only some expressions count: only some voices will be heard and taken seriously. This is all about power, but it is a form of power masked by its individualism and the foundational status which gets attached to taste, as later sections will discuss.

This class fraction broadly maps on to Bourdieu’s ‘dominated fraction of the dominant class’ – high in cultural capital but (relatively) low in economic capital. Little surprise, then, that their expressions of disgust occur around the axis of cultural capital.

As Miller notes, ‘There is not much difficulty in discerning the difference between tattoos designed to shock one’s parents and those designed to identify with them’ (1997: 209)

The charge of retrogression is a recurring one and is arguably itself a means of distinction. As Nikolas Rose (1991: 18) notes, the working class are seen as suffering from a ‘cultural lag’. And Bourdieu argues that, ‘not only reason and modernity but also the movement of change are on the side of the governors - ministers, employers or experts’; unreason and archaism, inertia and conservatism are on the side of the people, the trade unions and critical intellectuals (Bourdieu, 1998: 25)

Their transgressions included failing to rigidly toilet-train their children and failing to feed infants ‘by the clock’, preferring to demand-feed. The practices for which working-class people were condemned in the 1950s are now prescribed by health-care professionals. I am not claiming that working-class people have therefore ‘got it right’, but, as I argue later, that more or less whatever they do is ‘wrong’.

And of course if racism comes to be seen only as embodied in the white working class, the institutional racism of the state, as well as racism on the part of middle-class people, becomes obscured.

I am indebted here to McRobbie’s characterization of responses to contemporary feminism (McRobbie, 2003: 133).

Miller makes an important distinction between disgust and contempt. Although both ‘assert a superior ranking as against their subject’ (Miller, 1997: 32) disgust, unlike contempt, is never indifferent to its object. Disgust appears to demand a certain visibility.
But see, for example, Douglas, 1992; Kristeva; 1982; Probyn, 2000;

I mean by this that Bourdieu’s explicit critique of Kant is brief. Clearly, the whole of Distinction is an extended, if implicit, critique of Kant’s Critique of Judgement.

Thanks to Annie Meyer for clarifying the translation.

This is similar to Skeggs’ (2004) analysis of the ways in which negative value is attached to working-class people. As Skeggs asks, who decides what counts as negative? (Skeggs, 2004: 102).

Although at other points, Bourdieu seems to essentialize classed taste by talking of the distinction between the ‘taste of necessity and the taste of luxury’ (1986: 178) I find his argument that the working class forms a negative foil to the middle class more convincing, not least because of the ways in which tastes shift over time (though the properly ‘tasteful’ is always owned by the middle classes).

This may look like an archaism but I am thinking here, not only of full-time servants, but of the many working-class women who clean middle-class homes and mind middle-class children. See Skeggs, 1997; Ehrenreich, 2002; Toynbee, 2003.

Much of this work has come from within feminism. See Hey (2003) for an overview of some of this work.

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