Lawler S. *White like them: whiteness and anachronistic space in representations of the English white working class*. *Ethnicities* 2012, **12**(4), 409-426.

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White like them: whiteness and anachronistic space in representations of the English white working class

Steph Lawler

Abstract
Themes of whiteness have informed many recent discussions of English national identity, yet the whiteness in question attaches to some groups and not others. In particular, whiteness is emblematically attached to members of the white working class, so that the whiteness of the middle classes becomes obscured.

This paper is concerned with representations of white working-class people in the context of recent media and other discussions of English national identity. Hence, it is concerned, not with the actions or sentiments of working-class people themselves, but with their positioning (by middle-class commentators) within an economy of cultural meaning around definitions of nation, multiculturalism and identity. Using press discussion of the BBC’s ‘White Season’ as a framing device, I argue that whiteness has come to be a signifier of white working-class existence. In this context, ‘white’ has shifted its meaning from something normal, normative and unmarked – Dyer’s ‘ordinary whiteness/whiteness as ordinary’ - to a marked – and markedly problematic – category that is applied only to some white people, who become bearers of ‘extreme whiteness’. This marking is linked with a positioning in the past, so that white working-class people can be marked as inhabiting ‘anachronistic space’.

Keywords: whiteness; class; White Season; modernity; progress; anachronistic time.
Extreme whiteness … leaves a residue, a way of being that is not marked as white, in which white people can see themselves. The residue is non-particularity, the space of ordinariness. The combination of extreme whiteness and plain, unwhite whiteness means that white people can both lay claim to the spirit that spires to the heights of humanity and yet supposedly speak and act disinterestedly as humanity’s most average and unremarkable representatives (Dyer, 1997: 223)

**Introduction**

The relationship between whiteness and working-classness is one that has received some attention in recent years, and the opprobrium heaped on white working-class people by middle-class observers is now well-documented. In this article, I aim to consider some new articulations of class and whiteness in England, through looking at a key set of representations which foregrounded white working-class existence. These representations occurred within the BBC’s White Season, screened in 2008, and within the perhaps inevitable media discussion that followed. There is a great deal to be said about this Season itself (and see, e.g. Gilborn, 2009; Rhodes 2010) but my primary focus is not the programmes shown in the Season, but the ways in which they were made meaningful in the surrounding media discussion. I am using this discussion to frame my arguments about wider articulations of whiteness in England at the present time, specifically in the context of conferred identities: those identities ascribed to persons whether or not they take them up. As Bauman has observed, the poor and the dispossessed are denied ‘the right to claim an identity as distinct from an ascribed and enforced classification’ (Bauman, 2004: 39,
emphasis his). Such identities, conferred on the powerless by the powerful, become doxic (Bourdieu, 1977) ways of understanding, framing and narrating these persons. Hence, I am using the media commentary here as illustrative of wider trends and meanings.

I want to consider what I see as new modes of articulation of whiteness in which ‘white’ becomes emblematically attached to ‘working-class’ and stripped from any association with ‘middle class’. In this context, working-class whiteness is less a ‘dirty whiteness’ (Haylett, 2001; Tyler, 2008) than an intensification of a newly problematic whiteness. This is not ‘ordinary whiteness/whiteness as ordinariness’ (Dyer, 1997) but a form of extreme whiteness or hyper-whiteness that works as a counterpoint to ‘ordinary’ (and middle-class) whiteness. It is framed as an unreflexive, axiomatically racist, whiteness. Importantly, it is also used to signify a lack of progress, a belonging in a past time.

‘Extreme’ whiteness, as I outline it here, may or may not be taken up and deployed by white working-class people themselves, who (in common with other groups) may or may not be unreflexive and racist. This certainly matters. But my concern is with the ways in which they come to be constituted as representational figures in this way, and with the links between this positioning and notions of a progressive nationhood. New codings of ‘white’ are coupled with – indeed intrinsically bound up with – continuing narratives of decline and retrogression. Through such narratives value is conferred or denied.

Both class and ‘race’ exist as something to be done: both have to be made and re-made (Bourdieu, 1998a; Dyer, 1997; Bonnett, 2000). If this is so, then neither can be done once and for all, and both have to be re-made in changing social, historical and political
circumstances. In the context of regional devolution, and at a time when English national identity has become newly problematic, anxieties about whiteness in the English national context become pressing (Haylett, 2001). I will argue in this paper that the splitting off of whiteness on to working-class others is one means of dealing with such anxieties.

**The White Season**

Whereas middle-class commentators are happy to defend white working class interests against the onslaught of politically correct multiculturalism, they will simultaneously deride and ridicule the feckless and undeserving poor, who have squandered the opportunities given to them by the welfare state, and can therefore rightfully be left to wallow in their own poverty (Sveinsson, 2009: 5).

In 2008, amid high levels of pre-publicity, the BBC launched a series of television programmes (five documentaries and one drama) under the heading ‘the White Season’.

The series website asked, ‘Is the white working class in Britain becoming invisible?’ Any possible invisibility, however, was linked, not to a class system in which working-class people are the losers (and constantly vilified for it) but only to issues of immigration, the racist policies of the far right, and putative generalized anxieties about nationhood:

Political parties debate the way forward for immigration, debate rages in the media and the popularity of the far-right continues to rise in some sections of society.

Against this backdrop, the White season explored the complex mix of feelings that led some white working class people to say they felt under siege, that their very sense of self was being brought into question (BBC, 2008a)
This contextualization was reinforced by the series’ trailer, which showed an apparently white (presumably British?) man’s face being progressively covered in black writing, until its whiteness disappears. Much of the writing is in non-English language and/or non-Roman script, but the words ‘Britain is changing’ (in English) are clearly visible. The none-too-subtle message seems to be that Britain is changing in such a way that whiteness as a marker of its citizens has disappeared; that ‘white’ no longer occupies a privileged place as an unspoken, normalized ‘zero-point’ of British identity. This is of course a tendentious suggestion, but even if it were allowed to stand, why is the focus solely on the white *working class*? If whiteness is becoming newly problematized, what happened to the whiteness of the white middle class (not to mention the aristocracy)? Since the whiteness of these groups was never considered during the series, it is clear that the whiteness considered by the White Season inhered within a combination of class and ‘race’ embodied only by white working-class people. Furthermore, and despite the references to ‘Britain’ and ‘Britishness’, the focus of the programmes (and discussion) was entirely English. Whiteness in England, it seems, has become a class signifier.

Several commentators (both academic and media) have rightly noted the series’ use of immigration as the sole contextualization for white working-class life. What has not been commented on, however, is the disappearance of the white middle class, who were absent from the series itself and only obliquely referred to in subsequent discussion. Neither was there any comment on the retrogression ascribed to the white working class. In terms of the former omission, Richard Klein, the commissioning editor, gives a clue in an article written as background to the series (Klein, *The Daily Mail*, 01.03.2008) in which he remarks that the
white working class ‘has felt the impact of the social revolution [presumably he means multiculturalism] perhaps more keenly than any other group’. Yet this still leaves open the question of why class relations and class antagonisms hardly featured. Relations of privilege are being drawn here in subtle ways: the privilege of the white working class (as white) has not disappeared but has been located in a past time, so that in the present time, they are cast as de-privileged by the winds of social change. This suggests that a group of racialized and / or ‘foreign’ others might be benefiting from such change. One thing is sure: the privilege of the white middle classes is never addressed within the series. I would suggest that one effect of this lacuna is to strip a (problematic) whiteness from the white middle classes, so that the problems associated with ‘white’ come to be working-class problems.

The White Season has to be seen in the context of a series of political and media commentaries which has, in recent years, crystallized sets of anxieties about Englishness and about class – even if class itself is rarely directly named. There are too many to summarize here but they include Hazel Blears’ (2005) statements about the forms of identification that ought to be made by British people from minority ethnic groups in the interests of ‘integration’ (Ford and Rumbelow, 2005), Margaret Hodge’s comments about fairness in relation to social housing in her constituency of Barking, East London (Hodge, 2007), and the limited electoral success of the far-right British National Party in the early years of the Twenty First Century. It has also to be set in the context of a so-called ‘war on terror’ which took place on the soil of two middle-eastern countries, a bombing campaign in London, and a creeping and arguably officially sanctioned Islamophobia. Much of the
commentary around these anxieties, from all quarters, has conflated ‘race’ with ‘immigration’.

There have been many effects of such events and interventions, but one has undoubtedly been the characterizing of white working-class people as more racist and more hostile to immigration than their middle-class counterparts (Clarke et al, 2009). This has been reinforced through the framing and reporting of successive opinion polls. Yet, as Clarke et al argue:

[F]urther analysis of the polls suggests firstly, that the difference between working and middle-class responses is more relative than absolute, and secondly, that the traditionally liberal graduates who comprise a chunk of the Labour vote are becoming less liberal on immigration (Clarke et al 2009: 140).

This certainly applies to the reporting of the opinion poll that accompanied the White Season. The ‘headline’ reporting of the poll results (repeated across several press stories) actually over-stated the degree of divergence between middle-class and working-class respondents. The Season, then, was framed in terms of a reported dis-ease and anxiety about ‘immigration’ on the part of white working-class people, backed by spurious ‘evidence’.

The white working class: ‘bewildered by the pace of change’.

A major – and, to me, surprising – theme that emerged from press commentary on the Season was a defence of white working-class existence. Right-of centre titles (The Times, The Telegraph and The Mail) tended to cast this defence in terms of the ‘damage’ done by
immigration and multiculturalism, representing the white working class as at the sharp end of government policies. For example:

And, yes, as men in pubs used to tell you all the time, ‘Enoch [Powell] was right’, at least in the sense that the great growth in immigration - his numerical projections proved accurate - has weakened our sense of national solidarity and produced tensions leading to violence. The strain on welfare, on policing, on ‘Britishness’, on civil peace is enormous. It was once unimaginable that British-born people would blow up their fellow-citizens in the name of Islam, but in London in 2005, it happened. ... It would be poor whites, not people like the liberal Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins [in 1968] who would find that they no longer ‘owned’ their streets. (Charles Moore, *The Telegraph*, 2008: 30)

Britain is a country entering the second stage of a gigantic social experiment - multiculturalism through mass immigration - for which, amazingly, no particular plans, projections or provisions were ever made. While immigration might be something the liberal left-wing are in favour of - and find very useful, vis-a-vis Ukrainian carpenters on £2 an hour - it is, in the main, the working classes who are actually living this multicultural life, and sharing their shops, schools, hospitals, pubs and streets with dozens of different nationalities, cultures and beliefs (Caitlin Moran, *The Times*, 2008: 4)

Coverage here illustrates Sveinsson’s argument that:
There is [in public discussion] no working class any more, only an underclass. Unless, of course, we are talking about multiculturalism, in which case the working class resurfaces from the depths of British history. In other words, it is permissible to use class as a stick to beat multiculturalism with, but not as a demand for increased equality for all (Sveinsson, 2009: 4).

White working-class existence, for these commentators, becomes a way to refuse multiculturalism by projecting their own refusal on to another group.

Within the left-of centre titles (*The Guardian, The Independent* and their Sunday editions) most commentators framed the narrative in terms of the deleterious effects of globalization, the decline in Britain’s manufacturing base, and the effects of the neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and beyond. For example:

> But it wasn't immigration that ripped the guts out of working-class Britain, white and non-white. It was the closure of whole industries, the rundown of manufacturing and council housing, the assault on trade unions, the huge transfer of resources to the wealthy, the deregulation of the labour market, and the unconstrained impact of neoliberal globalisation under both Tories and New Labour. Almost none of that has had a look-in so far in The White Season.


Here, the projections work differently: through suggestions that the time of the working class is gone. Indeed, all defences of the white working class in this context – across Left and Right - work through casting them as an un-modern category: as living in a past time.
Although only one programme in the White Series (Last Orders) could be said to *explicitly* frame the white working class as archaic, press coverage was suffused with this theme. This framing is found across both the BBC’s own commentary on the season and in print coverage, and is exemplified in the following exchange from Newsnight Review:

Safraz Manzoor: The film [Last Orders] is an elegy for a certain kind of life. It’s not really about a working men’s club, it’s about a certain type of people who feel besieged by the city outside their door.

Kristy Wark: […] They are not necessarily feeling besieged about their race, about— but about their time and place. It’s like there aren’t Victorian music halls anymore because their time has passed.

(BBC, 2008b, Newsnight Review)

More generally, throughout the coverage, white working-class people were cast as ‘struggling to embrace the modern, diverse, globalised, everchanging world’, and ‘bewildered by the pace of change’ as the commissioning editor, Richard Klein, put it. (Klein, *The Mail*, 2008: 36). They belong in a past time, but, it seems they can’t help it:

In *the modern world’s rush to embrace diversity and globalisation*, we cannot afford to ignore the voices of any section of society which feels *bewildered by the pace of change*. If we don’t give everyone a voice, it may only lead to further social division. I’m hoping this season will enable a debate to take place in an open and honest way. (Klein, *The Mail*, 2008: 36: emphasis added).
What the [white liberal middle class] seem to believe is that the "respectable working class", once celebrated - for instance in 1960s' kitchen-sink dramas - have become extinct, leaving a residue of scum (though they would never use that word). And there may be an element of truth in this view. But if it is true, they did not die out: they were assassinated.


For Lott, the ‘residue of scum’ is the fault of others, but nevertheless becomes a way of understanding the white working class. The decline of heavy manufacturing industry, metonymically linked with working-class identity, comes to stand as a proxy for an absence, in which white working-class people are unable to deal with not only immigration but more general social change, for instance in gender roles. For example:

I grew up in a working-class northern town, with a white working-class dad, so I'm well aware of many of the social and cultural issues that have been particularly problematic for these communities: the decline of manufacturing and traditional industries; the lack of a significant political party that speaks for them (a vacuum into which the BNP has sneaked); women’s empowerment and the blurring of gender roles; since league tables, the increasing difficulty of getting into good schools in the face of competition from the middle classes; even, being priced out of watching your local football team.


For Caitlin Moran, they are set alongside another group whose ‘unmodernity’ is also understood as a cause for concern:
Last Orders - whether intentionally or not - shoots the old, white working classes as grotesques: crater-pored, cross-eyed, with tiny, pinprick eyes, mouths so wrinkled from smoking they look like combs, and noses crystalline with gout. They all look like Breughel peasants - unimaginably distant from the modern world of smoothies, iPhones and Lewis Hamilton. They look, unkindly framed, like they need to die out - although whether they should be replaced by, say, a tight-knit community of Muslims living under Sharia is another matter.

(Moran, The Times, 2008: 4)

We see here the exclusionary impetus of the progress narrative claimed as its own by the white middle classes. The white working class is not the only group excluded from its embrace (and we need to remember one rationale used for the invasion of Afghanistan was the ‘liberation’ of women and girls from the alleged backwardness of Islam – see Butler, 2006). What is important to note here is the ways in which this exclusion is based on the historical project of claiming progress on the part of the white middle classes.

**Anachronistic space**

If the white working class is set in a past time, to whom does the present time belong? To consider this, we need to consider middle-class claims to ‘progress’. Historically, the emergent English bourgeoisie of the Nineteenth Century had to distinguish itself both from the aristocracy and from the working classes. Its claims to distinction centred on qualities such as hard work and thrift, but also on the claiming of competence in using and experiencing cultural resources (Gunn, 2005) and on claims to being a progressive social
force – as the very embodiment of modernity (Davidoff and Hall, 1987). Indeed, notions of progress might be seen as intrinsic to middle-class cultural capital (Lawler, 2008). Marx himself credited the bourgeoisie of his own time with unprecedented ‘progressive’ powers, arguing that the rise of the bourgeoisie necessarily entailed a ‘constant revolutionizing [of] the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society’ (Marx and Engels, 2004 [1848]: 7).

Marshall Berman (1990) has drawn attention to the relationship between this form of rapid and necessary social change and the kinds of persons that exist (or, it is held, ought to exist) under such conditions, arguing:

In order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personalities must take on the fluid and open form of this society. Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively to demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through (Berman 1990: 95-6).

Modernity, then, involves a particular relationship to the past, one in which there is constant supersession; and this involves the development of a particular kind of personality. It is important to note that this ‘modern’ personality has come to be linked with the middle classes (Rose, 1991; Lawler, 2008). Above all, ‘progress’ has come to be cast as a property of middle-class selves and middle-class ways of life. These claims to progressiveness were part and parcel of the emergent class’s claims to superiority. For Stallybrass and White, they were:

a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manners, morals and imaginative writings, in its body, bearing and taste, a
subliminal elitism which was constitutive of its historical being. Whatever the radical
nature of its ‘universal’ democratic demand, it had engraved in its subjective identity
all the marks by which it felt itself to be a different, distinctive and superior class
(Stallybrass and White 1986: 202).

If at home the English middle class sought the securing of its status through progressive
political reform, in its imperial project, it sought innumerable ways of classifying the
colonised others as somehow existing in anterior time – as un-modern. ‘Race’ was one of
the main mechanisms for this characterization, as Ann McClintock has shown. McClintock,
following Susan Buck-Morss (1989), characterizes this move as the mobilizing of
‘anachronistic space’: ‘In the mapping of European progress, images of “archaic time” - that
is, non-European time - were systematically evoked to identify what was new about
industrial modernity’ (1995: 40). Social differences, then, became mapped on to time:

The power of anachronistic space is that it guaranteed difference within the
Enlightenment idea of universality. Through the progress narrative and the trope of
anachronistic space, Europeans could retain belief in the idea of a universal mankind
(represented in and managed by Europe), while at the same time retaining the idea
of difference and hierarchy. Social difference, in other words, was projected into the
axis of time and thereby naturalised: certain groups and peoples were represented as
somehow lagging some centuries behind the whites. Colonised people do not
inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic
space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, bereft of language
and history – the living embodiment of the archaic (McClintock, 2001: 19-20.
Emphasis hers).
McClintock shows how not only the colonized other but the white working class at home were represented through anachronistic space: existing at the same point in time, yet somehow not belonging in the time of the present. Importantly, ‘race’ became a trope to indicate both progress and value: whiteness belonged to people who could claim both (and indeed both progress and value were tied up with each other) so that, as Alistair Bonnett (2000) has also shown, the English white working-class – along with other groups who would now be deemed ‘white’ – were not considered properly white at all: they were not white enough. When white racial identity was used to straightforwardly mark superiority, working-class people had to be placed at a distance from it. ‘Primitiveness’ – the opposite of progressive modernity, and seen as being shared by colonized subjects and the working class ‘at home’ – was understood as antithetical to whiteness.

I want to suggest that this historical linking of progress and value with middle classness is still very much with us. While it is important to note the heterogeneity of all classes, and thus to note the existence of different middle-class fractions (there is a world of intra-class difference between the newcomers and the inheritors: Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979), it is also important to note the privilege of the white middle class via a vis other groups. Equally, there is a difference between a rejection of middle-class values from within the class (as in for example bohemian middle class youth, or counter-cultural middle-class leftists) and a rejection of the privilege that comes with being middle class. Part of this privilege, as Reay et al (2007) have shown, lies in the ability to move across categories and for this not to matter – so secure is the hold on familial social and cultural capital. Above all, the point is not whether or not the middle classes are well-meaning, but whether they enjoy privileges
which mean they can claim valuable characteristics such as progressiveness as part of their selves. Clearly there are conflicts and ambivalences going on within the middle class, as within all classes. But this should not blind us to the ways in which it is middle-class people who are able to claim a monopoly on the normal and are in a position to make judgements and to make then stick.

As I have suggested, if the emergent English middle class claimed progress to itself, this progress had to be conceptually stripped from the classes against which it defined itself. So both the aristocracy and the working classes came to be defined as suffering from a political, social and cultural atavism: in the present, but not of it. So, current linkages of the white working class with the ‘unmodern’ (Haylett 2001) have a long history. White working-class people have been cast as suffering from a ‘cultural lag’ (Rose, 1991), as lacking ‘reason’ (Bourdieu, 1988b), as untrustworthy and as failing to follow (the latest) ‘expert’ advice (Roberts, 1999). According to a recent Demos’ report (Lexmond and Reeves, 2009) they fail to teach their children the necessary ‘soft’ skills appropriate to the modern world – belonging instead in some murky past time. As such, their misfortunes can be placed at their own door.

As Chris Haylett has skilfully shown, there was an intensification of this discourse under ‘New Labour’, when the white working class became cast as the enemies of a modernization project that was centrally concerned with the modernization of ‘the nation’ and relied on both material / political reforms and on a rhetorical framing of good and bad participants in the modern state:
In these circumstances a representative middle class is positioned at the vanguard of `the modern' which becomes a moral category referring to liberal, cosmopolitan, work and consumption based lifestyles and values, and `the unmodern' on which this category depends is the white working-class `other', emblematically a throwback to other times and places. This middle-class dependency on working-class `backwardness' for its own claim to modern multicultural citizenship is an unspoken interest within the discourse of illegitimacy around the white working-class poor. (Haylett, 2001: 365)

What I want to highlight here is the ways in which this alleged un-modernity is specifically framed in terms of whiteness. That is, the marked whiteness of the white working class is not contingently related to their lack of progressiveness, but is intrinsic to it. In contrast to the white middle classes - ‘the social grouping with all the culture but none of the ethnicity’ (Reay, 2008: 1076) they have become the social grouping with none of the culture and a newly-acquired, and trashy, ethnicity.

**Progressive whiteness**

On the face of it, the White Season could be seen as move towards de-throning the universality of whiteness: ‘whiteness as ordinariness’ (Dyer, 1997). In highlighting ‘white’ the Series *marks* the category, a move scholars of whiteness have called for so as to note both the particularity and the privilege of whiteness. The season gave a particularity to whiteness but this particularity was confined to only one class group. The whiteness of the
white middle classes remains universal, silent, and unmarked. Nor is this confined to this specific representation: while the phrase ‘white, male middle-class’ and its variants is frequently used as a catch-all term denoting privilege, the whiteness of real, embodied (male or female) middle-class people is rarely investigated in popular discussion. Discussions of middle-classness are relatively unusual (it is simply ‘normal’). However, some recent discussions have investigated the ‘squeezed’ middle\textsuperscript{xii}. Here, however, the whiteness of white middle-class persons is not referenced, and any alleged ‘danger’ to middle-class ways of life is not attributed to immigration or multiculturalism.

What is happening to whiteness, then? Is a middle-class whiteness unproblematic? Whiteness is politically and socially mobilized in different contexts. Both ‘race’ and class have to be made and re-made in conditions in which only some groups have the power to draw distinctions: to make judgements and to make them stick. Hence I consider the characters of ‘the white working class’ in discussions of the *White Season* and similar representations as figures in a landscape. The story is not made by working-class people (Black or white) themselves, but by a middle-class commentariat. Like many such narratives, it is a narrative about the worth of the middle classes (Skeggs, 2004).

I want to suggest that changes in the ways in which whiteness has become configured have led to specific forms of articulation between class and whiteness, such that white working-class people have become cast as the bearers of a problematic and unreflexive form of whiteness which has come to be located in the past. In contrast, and outside of academic circles at least, middle-class whiteness continues to be silently normalized, suggesting an easier fit with the present. Yet it’s important to note that for some groups of white middle-
class people - the liberal white middle class - whiteness becomes a stigma that can nevertheless be inhabited as long as it is reflexively acknowledged as a stigma. Shona Hunter points to the development of ‘distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate whitenesses’, adding:

[I]t is the expression of shame, rather than pride which can serve to sanitize whiteness. Whereas legitimate and idealized whiteness in the past was based on heroism and civilizing missions in far-off places, legitimate whiteness is now based on the ability to explicitly atone for past wrongs, the ability to civilize the self at home. Legitimate whitenesses are constructed not through the displacement and annihilation of blackness, but through the displacement of illegitimate whiteness. Expressions of shame then become the marker of legitimate forms of whiteness (Hunter, 2010: 470. Emphasis hers).

This form of ‘sanitized’ whiteness is based on forms of education and training, in which a reflexive relationship to the white person’s own whiteness is encouraged and endorsed. Within ‘liberal’ groupings at least, it becomes a safe whiteness – not unproblematic, but containable.

This is also echoed in the observations of Diane Reay and her associates (Reay et al, 2007; James et al, 2009) on the white, middle-class people they interviewed, all of whom had made the decision to send their children to urban comprehensive schools (and hence could be considered to have made ‘unconventional’ education choices). Yet in their research, we see the deployment of a specific kind of whiteness as a resource to mark difference from, and superiority to, other groups.: [O]ur analysis suggested that some of the white middle-class parents saw themselves as ‘a darker shade of pale’, that is, as occupying a white ethnic identity that was
distinguished by its cosmopolitan acceptance of ethnic diversity and even its anti-racism. However, this notion of whiteness was also constructed in opposition to that of both the white working classes and those white middle classes who made more conventional middle-class school choices (see Reay et al, 2007). There were many negative references to white working-class young people, some of which suggested fear or contempt. Terms like ‘white trash’, ‘chav’ or ‘charver’ were quite common (James et al, 2009: 85).

As the authors comment, ‘While there is much valuing and validation of the multi-ethnic other, what is also interesting here is what is being displaced and who it is being displaced onto’ (Reay et al, 2007: 1048). This kind of whiteness becomes a form of (multi)cultural capital, a way of showing one's knowledge through valuing (albeit not unproblematically so) multiculturalism. The ‘white trash’ who fail to value education become the objects of fear (of a bad education, of contamination) and scorn. ‘In the process of gaining multicultural capital the white working classes are residualized. They come simultaneously to represent excess and nothing, in the sense of having and being of no value’ (Reay et al, 2007: 1049) But racism has not been displaced by this class hatred:

[T]he association of excess with blackness never entirely goes away and there is still the fear/paranoia about ‘big black boys’ .... Both ‘white working-class trash’ and ‘big black thugs’ are positioned here as ‘abject’, the embodiment of that which is valueless (Reay et al, 2007: 1049).
There are echoes here of Povinelli’s (2002) Australian work, in which the non-white ‘other’ is required to provide a form of authentic difference without offending white liberal sensibilities.

These accounts suggest the development of new forms of middle-class whiteness, knowingly and self-consciously constructed as at a distance from a problematic whiteness. It marks ‘left-liberal’ locations and as such marks a distance from ‘conventional’ or right-wing whiteness, attributed to some sections of the middle class. Yet it remains fundamentally (middle) classed. The white working class, who have the added disadvantage of being understood as not knowing or valuing the ‘right’ things, are also attributed a problematic, unreflexive whiteness: cast as unable to acknowledge their white privilege (while their class disadvantage is silenced). When white racial identity could signify progress and modernity, white working-class people were positioned at a distance from it, as McClintock shows. When it is understood as at least potentially stigmatized, white working-class people are represented as axiomatically embodying it.

If this is so, then attempts to situate the white working-class as ‘belonging’ in the past become coherent in the context of their alleged inability to keep up with new times. Since they are discursively positioned as the authors of their own misfortune any questioning of their de-valued position is effectively ruled out. The only promise, it would seem, lies in their becoming more middle class – in getting away. Such is the close metonymy between middle-classness and progress that if they were to show signs of what counts as progress, they would effectively be understood as ceasing to bear the markers of working-class existence:
hence Howard Jacobson (2008) can claim that working-class people stop being working-class if they read books.

It must also be noted that returning poor whites to an earlier time is also to return them to a time when it was easier to see England as emblematically white. In metonymically linking the working class with whiteness, a double articulation is made: they are the bearers of a problematic whiteness, disavowed by liberal middle classes, and they are placed in a past, in a time before the rhetoric of multiculturalism, before such whiteness became a ‘problem’ for white people themselves (its status has always been a problem for people who are not white). White working-class people thus become located in a time emblematically if inaccurately marked by whiteness. Yet the whiteness of the white middle classes (of all political persuasions and cultural trends) has not gone away: it is merely hidden within rhetorics of progress and education.

Conclusion

There are many stories currently told about the ‘problem’ of the white working class: these stories cohere around certain themes (the white working class as racist, as bewildered, as threatened and unhappy, as at the sharp end of multiculturalism). The stories vary according to the political persuasions of the commentators. But there is no story in which the white working class are anything other than inhabiting anachronistic space, or in which the privilege of the white middle class is meaningfully interrogated. Above all, the workings of a class system are not (and I’d suggest cannot be) interrogated. They cannot be interrogated because middle-class privilege is both silently normalized and is the benchmark by which other forms of in/equality are measured (Brown, 1993).
The ‘extreme whiteness’ attached to the English white working class at the present time is only one manifestation of the political mobilizing of racial categories to signify value. In this case, their ‘extreme’, marked whiteness is not an incidental by-product of their marking as inferior and backward, but an integral part of it. Such mobilizing can only be done by those with the power to claim identities to themselves and to ascribe them to others. As Richard Dyer has suggested, extreme whiteness is ‘functional in relation to the ordinary, is even perhaps a condition of establishing whiteness as ordinary’ (Dyer, 1997: 222). If commentators on the political right can use the marked whiteness of white working-class people as a means of defending against the threatening multicultural other, those on the left can use it to establish a reactionary, unknowing, primitive, white other. Across both left and right, in assigning a white particularity only to the white working class, the white middle class can remain ordinary, progressive and ‘normal’.

\[\text{See for example Haylett, 2001; Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008.}\]

\[\text{I am using articulation here in the twin sense of an articulation (a speaking out, a form of representation) of white working-classness; and in the sense of an articulation between the two signifiers ‘white’ and ‘working-class’. See Slack (1996).}\]
I accessed press articles from all the UK national newspapers using LexisNexis. Aside from television listings, there were 27 articles on the White Season, and discussion pieces were found mainly in the ‘broadsheet’ titles: The Times, The Telegraph, The Guardian, the Independent, and their Sunday equivalents, and the Financial Times. The long article by Richard Klein in The Mail was an exception. I also read the BBC’s coverage of the Season on their website. Analysis was based on close reading of the texts. For the sake of brevity, I have cited only a few of the articles here.

As Skeggs has argued, representations of working-class existence are rarely anything to do with working class people themselves: they should be seen, rather, as attempts on the part of middle-class people to accrue value (Skeggs, 2004: 118).

The full list of programmes is shown in the filmography.

And it must be noted that, in some contexts, ‘Englishness’ can itself stand as a signifier of ethnic homogeneity and ‘un-modernity’, in contrast to a progressive ‘Britishness’. See Condor, 2006.

Hazel Blears and Margaret Hodge were both Ministers in the then Labour administration.

To correspond with the White Season, the BBC commissioned a survey which aimed to look at classed differences in the experience of the economy, housing crime, immigration, and so on. The survey was carried out by Populus, who interviewed a random sample of 1,012 white British adults. The full survey results are available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/06_03_08_Newsnight_White%20Season_poll.pdf
There is not space here to explore the findings and their representation, but it must be noted that the poll showed high levels of cross-class agreement on many indicators, but this was suppressed in the reportage, with differences being both highlighted and exaggerated.

\textsuperscript{ix} Tellingly, the photograph illustrating this story is of a ‘1970s bingo night in a working men’s club’.

\textsuperscript{x} Demos is a centre-left thinktank.

\textsuperscript{xi} Charges of retrogression are usually linked with narratives of decline, in which the white working class is framed as having been valued and valuable some time in the past. As I have argued elsewhere (Lawler, 2005) these narratives are not supported by the evidence in that they have always been vilified.

\textsuperscript{xii} See, for example, Beckett 2010, and the BBC Newsnight programme on the ‘squeezed middle’ (BBC, 2011a).

\textsuperscript{xiii} I am not suggesting that the liberal middle-classes are therefore axiomatically non-racist: simply that there are modes of expressions of whiteness which are ‘approved’.

\textsuperscript{xiv} I write this (Summer 2011) shortly after a period of rioting and looting in several English cities. In the aftermath of these disturbances, the historian, David Starkey, characterized poor whites (whom he explicitly labelled ‘chavs’) as having ‘become black’ (BBC 2011b). Starkey here is deploying a different mobilizing of ‘race’ to the one I discuss here and unfortunately there is not space to discuss this intervention. It must be noted,
however, that, unlike the representations I discuss here, his comments provoked widespread (though not universal) condemnation within the media.

References


BBC (2008a) ‘What is the White Season? (http://www.bbc.co.uk/white/what.shtml

Accessed July 2011

BBC (2008b) Newsnight Review ‘White Season’


BBC (2011a) Newsnight: Squeezed in Sandwich – the Middle Class Under Pressure.

BBC (2011b) Newnight: ‘England riots: the whites have become black, says David Starkey’.


London: Verso.


Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.


Filmography

Last Orders (dir. Henry Singer)

Rivers of Blood (dir. Ashley Getting, writer Denys Blakeway)

White Girl (dir. Hettie MacDonald, writer Abi Morgan)

The Poles Are Coming! (dir. Alex Mackintosh)

The Primary (dir. Sarah Waldron)

All White in Barking (dir. Marc Isaacs).