

Forget angry stereotypes - Britain's 'white working class' does not exist

Monday 13 August 2018, by [WILLIAMS Zoe](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2018).

One often hears on the British left the complaint that “middle class” commentators only mention the country's white working class to criticise nationalist attitudes or to criticise people receiving social security and welfare benefits. But there's a deeper fallacy here

I do a [podcast called Another Europe Is Possible](#), and this week we recorded an episode with the sociologist Brendan McGeever talking about the politics of a nation in decline. He said, en passant, “the white working class is a fallacy”. It wasn't the standard complaint of recent years, namely: “Why do people always bang on about the white working class whenever they want to spirit up some soft nationalism or deliver some uncomfortable ‘truth’ about benefits?” McGeever made his assertion as an objective fact: white working class is a sociologically meaningless term. Not in the sense that there are no working-class people who are white, just in the sense that, since society has been multiracial, which is to say, for decades, the working class has been multiracial. There is no distinct category of working-class people who are white and face fundamentally different structural conditions from working-class people who are not white, which is what class is supposed to be about.

That doesn't mean there has never been any race-based division within the working class, though it's weird to single this class out, when the upper class is most feverishly protective, racially, of its institutions. Why do we never say “white upper class”? It's taken for granted that they are white. Which suggests that they are much more monocultural, and by design, than the class in which the lust for a monoculture is supposed to be a giant dirty secret. Why is there no “white middle class”? Because it would be considered racist to draw conclusions about people's attitudes and beliefs, via their colour, in the middle class, where everybody is obviously completely normal.

The only logical reason to differentiate within a class by skin colour is if you want to talk about the element that doesn't like mixing with other ethnicities. But then “[white working class](#)” would mean “racist working class”. Anyway, to do that, you would have to ask the white working class its actual opinion, which the people who talk about them tend not to do. Who knows, they might not all think the same thing. Better to demarcate by employment status and GCSE results (these are also the key metrics of the “left-behind”, which is, again, racially coded: you are never “left-behind”, if you are black).

The white working class's meaning has expanded to make even less sense, embodying anything angry and Brexity, despite the fact that the class split of the referendum vote was relatively even. Anyone querying the term is automatically scorning the lived reality of working classness.

If you live in a multicultural area, particularly if you are happy there, you may be white and working class, but you are no longer “white working class”. You're metropolitan or, to give you your full title, [metropolitan liberal elite](#). This term has a longer pedigree, but it used to mean the dozen

people who had read Habermas and lived in north London. Now it means anyone who drinks coffee from a shop, and believes in the rule of law.

It's weird that there is a white working class, but no black working class. You don't get your own category within the class unless you are white, though it is impossible to tell what the subtext is there (black people don't truly belong in the working class? Black people, being victims of discrimination, automatically ascend to the liberal elite?) Sometimes deeper meaning is hard to infer when you are dealing with complete bullshit. Sometimes it would be quicker to just call it bullshit.

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The Guardian

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