

SOCIAL CLASS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH SOCIETY AND HOW IT IS PORTRAYED IN THE NEWSPRINT MEDIA

Ján Haláček

The realities of class in modern British life remain a contentious topic to this day, in spite of the word's almost total absence from public debate and discourse over the past decade. During its 13-year tenure, the Labour Party carefully avoided referring to "class" in its administration, policies and political manifestos. The day-to-day existence of class in Britain, however, manifests itself through a wide range of ordinary daily actions, including a person's choice of clothing, sport, supermarkets, holiday destinations or vocabulary. Candid and open conversations about class, however, have become increasingly few and far between.

The challenge facing Britain is deciding whether it is better to recognise the class restraints that still exist and deal with them, or continue to pretend that they do not exist and address solely their consequences in individual lives. The recent general elections seemed to raise the issue of class more overtly under former Prime Minister Gordon Brown than had been the case under Tony Blair, who left office in 2007. In the face of increasing anger at the damage caused in Britain by the recent financial meltdown, the rhetoric of evident class warfare has become louder and louder. The "class war" in Britain is not over, as many commentators, pundits, thinkers, and politicians have claimed.

Societies reliance on the media to provide them with an insight into the world puts the media in a very powerful position. The planned research focuses on the news portrayal from two daily newspapers (The Guardian and The Times) and two weekly magazines (The New Statesman and The Spectator), as a means of examining the differences in portrayals dependent on the target audience of the publication and whether and how these media acknowledge the continuing existence of (huge) social class divide between rich and poor in contemporary British society.

The impact that print media have on various forms of behaviour, learning, and political, cultural and social attitudes has been for a long time a subject of both comprehensive research and vigorous public debate. Print media's influence on individuals' conceptions of the world and their social reality is enormous and worth reviewing. The planned analyses will be based on stating that media coverage of a specific issue, in our case a presence of social class divisions, comes into existence only by means of the interaction and power relations occurring among journalists, media and the public, with various structural conditions limiting their activities.

If the author wishes to formalise these basic concepts of his future analyses, it can be beneficial to use Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "field" (*champ* in French). In his theory, field can be seen as a relatively autonomous, structured social space comprising a group of actors having something in common and factors distinctive within the group, such as its own rules, schemes of domination, valid opinions, and senses of values.

When examining the field of politics, Bourdieu described the concept of field as follows:

Talking of politics as field means that the field of politics is a micro-cosmos (I cite this word from Raymond Barre), that is, relatively autonomous and small social world in the grand social world. We can find many of the same kind of proprieties, relations, actions and processes in the micro-cosmos as in the grand society, but the processes and phenomena take a particular form in the micro-cosmos. What is included in the concept of autonomy is: a field is an autonomous micro-cosmos in the social macro-cosmos. (Bourdieu 2000: 52)

A field is self-determining, but it is not unchangeable. Bourdieu explained,

“A field is a field of forces, and a field of fighting to transform the power relations.” (ibid: 61)

Each field is characterized by the relations between the actors in the field and the relations between the field and other fields or the actors of other fields. The field of journalism commands less independence from other fields, compared to other fields. The field of journalism seeks to control and influence other fields, but it is also at the same time intensely exposed to the pressures of other fields. Bearing these qualities of the journalistic field in mind, Bourdieu wrote:

Journalists—I should say the field of journalism—owe their importance in the social world to the fact that they actually monopolise the instruments of production and diffusion of information to a large degree, and through instruments, they also monopolise the access of ordinary people as well as other cultural producers including servants, artists and writers to what was once called “public space”, that is, the ground of diffusion. (Bourdieu 1996: 52)

The field of journalism has a particularity: It is much more dependent on the external forces than any other field of cultural production, such as the field of mathematics, the field of literature, the field of judiciary, the field of science and so forth. It directly depends on the demands of actors outside of the journalistic fields. It is more dependent on the sanction of market and on popularity, probably, than the field of politics (ibid: 61)

While the journalistic field has a conflicting nature, it is also a field of cross-reference:

Nobody reads so many newspapers as journalists do, while journalists tend to think that everybody reads as many newspapers as they do.-----For the journalists, reading newspapers is an indispensable activity and the review of presses is a tool of their work: to know what they say, we have to know what the other said. This is one of the mechanisms to cause uniformity in the products offered to us. (ibid: 24)

The above mentioned Bourdieu’s remarks are really astute and revealing. Nonetheless, it is important to underline, at the same time, that such cross-reference can

also create heterogeneity among journalists and the media, as they are expected to offer their readers or their audiences information that is not identical with one that others provided. It is therefore vital to emphasize that cross-reference can produce both uniformity and diversity.

Since the field of journalism is full of these contradictions, it is rather spurious to make sweeping or general conclusions about the nature of journalism by not paying attention to such conflicts and variety. It is thus crucial to research the actual examples of the print media articles to be able to establish how the British print media produce and construct the concept of class in contemporary Britain.

Also, in order to evaluate conditions confining journalists and the media in general, it is necessary to examine the role of journalists and the media in relation to the state and society, as journalists and the media function within the state and society. It goes without saying that journalists and the media can be both heterogeneous and homogeneous. Although journalism is expected to be independent from other institutions, organizations or individuals, it is nonetheless always under the influence and pressure of external powers. When interacting with the outside world, the world of journalism is not stagnant, but active, and it is always brimming with contradictions. It is essential we understand this conflicting and dynamic nature of the relationship between journalism and the external world theoretically, employing clear-cut and conclusive examination.

Literature

1. BOURDIEU, Pierre. 1996. *Sur la Télévision*. Paris: Raisons d'Agir Éditions.
2. BOURDIEU, Pierre. 2000. *Propos Sur le Champ Politique*. Lyon: Universitaires de Lyon
3. ČAJKOVÁ, Soňa. 2000. 'Use of Interdisciplinary Approach in Literary Text Analysis' in *Teaching Foreign Languages To Adults*. Nitra: University of Constantine the Philosopher, p. 296-301.

Summary

The presented article represents one of possible components of the author's future dissertation paper and derives from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the field of journalism within his theory of constructive structuralism. It will be applied to the issue of class and social stratification in present-day Britain and how it is addressed by the particular British print news media. The author will divide the final dissertation thesis into three parts. The first should deal with the empirical depiction of what can be read in the selected British print news media. The second will concentrate on the theoretical interpretation of what can be read and what is concealed and manipulated, that is, the specific nature of the journalistic field. The third section will involve the image of the world and its class system within modern British society as constructed by the journalists in the specific British print news media.