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INTRODUCTION

Cancelled Futures?

MY MUM WAS born and raised in Birmingham, England's "second city", in the 1960s. Her dad, my granddad, worked in one of the many foundries in Dudley, a West Midlands town not far from Birmingham, at the heart of a region often referred to as the Black Country. The foundries, such as the one my granddad worked at, produced metal mouldings for railways and Britain's automotive industry. They also provided plentiful jobs for men in the region, including recently arrived Punjabi migrants such as my granddad, many of whom began coming to England from India in the 1950s. This was a legacy of the British Empire as people migrated from the colonies to the metropole following decolonisation, in part due to the implementation of the 1948 Nationality Act, which allowed full rights and freedom of movement. These newly arrived migrants tended to perform the most dangerous jobs in terrible conditions, often whilst being subjected to the indignity of harsh racism from their bosses and colleagues. Though the work was tough, my granddad's wage as a metal moulder was enough to support a large family and buy a house in Birmingham.

My mum remembers a relatively happy upbringing in the Midlands. Aged 16, she did as was expected, leaving school with a handful of what were once known as CSEs, with the plan to get an "office job". College, let alone university, was never on the horizon. For my mum, an "office job was better than working in a shop", more respectable perhaps, as she successfully secured work as a receptionist at a local company, a good working-class job with decent pay. That might have been a prelude to the rest of her life. But, at 18, life took my mum from the second city to the first (Mancunians might beg to differ about this

ordering), London. There she worked an array of similar jobs to the one she had in Birmingham. Along the way, she had me and my sister, raising us alone away from family support networks. Seeking greater stability for me and my sister, and perhaps reflecting a sense of something left unfulfilled, aged 30, she enrolled on an Access to Higher Education Diploma (a course designed to offer routes into higher education by condensing A-Levels and any relevant GCSE resits into one year) at a local college. On completion of the course, she successfully applied to study law at University College London (where I now work), an hour's commute from where we lived, graduating three years later. After a brief stint working as a trainee solicitor, a time in which she seemed perennially busy, working long hours incompatible with raising two children alone, she decided a career in teaching would be more suitable. As luck would have it, the UK government began an aggressive recruitment drive for teachers in the early years of Tony Blair's Labour Government, offering fully funded places, plus a small stipend, to entice people to retrain as teachers, an offer my mum took up, studying for her postgraduate teacher degree at University of East London, not too far from where we grew up. She has worked in state education ever since.

You may wonder what this has to do with the working-class young people living in London, Rochdale and Morecambe who are the focus of this book. But I open with this very brief sketch of my mum's life because it illustrates two points that are important for us going forward. Firstly, English working-class narratives and histories erase people like my grandfather, who was employed in an ostensibly working-class job and was actively involved in the trade union for decades as a shop steward (essentially a workplace union representative). Deindustrialisation in places like the Midlands, Greater Manchester and Bradford was a multi-racial class experience that deeply impacted local migrant communities, whose very presence in England reflects colonial histories and related global inequalities.¹ Secondly, much has changed in Britain since my mum was able to undertake her project of social mobility, which propelled her to a comfortable middle-class existence. All of the educational opportunities my mum took advantage of were free: the Access Course, her three-year law degree and the teacher training. She did not spend a

penny on this educational journey (even being paid when she did the teacher training). A couple of years after she graduated from University College London, things changed. In 1998, New Labour introduced tuition fees at £1000 a year, paving the way for further fee increases. Six years later, in 2004, Labour tripled fees to £3000 per year, before fees were tripled again to a £9000 top rate in 2010 by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. That is a nine-fold increase in just 12 years. On taking power in 2024, Keir Starmer's Labour raised fees to £9500. Access Courses are also no longer free, costing between £3000 and £3400 per year. At the same time, the Educational Maintenance Allowance grant, which previously supported working-class students at college with a small weekly stipend, has been removed in England. Today, someone in my mum's position would be faced with the possibility of taking on over £40,000 worth of debt in tuition fees alone, not to mention the interest on this debt and the potential necessity of taking out maintenance loans in the context of soaring prices for essential goods and services.

In light of these changes, the working-class young people you will meet across this book's pages face a very different equation than my mum did in the early 1990s. The working-class jobs that my granddad did in Dudley, with secure tenure and decent wages, are a thing of the past, as old industrial bases have been hollowed out, with the economy now increasingly oriented around the financial sector in London. The most readily available working-class jobs are insecure, flexible jobs in the service sector. University is now an incredibly expensive risk that might not bring the reward it once promised, with the graduate premium (the increased earnings associated with a degree) diminishing over the last ten years as an increasing number of graduates now work non-graduate jobs.² Technological changes are wiping out entry-level graduate jobs and have created a highly complex, insecure labour market that is increasingly predicated on precarious zero-hours contract work. In such a context, it should not surprise us that parental wealth is now the best determinant of a child's future destination with the chances of upward social mobility as low as they have ever been in Britain.³ This book is about how working-class young people with no inheritance coming their way, with limited insider knowledge of how school, university or the

labour market work, and with no connections to facilitate entry into nebulous career pathways, attempt to plan for the future in what is a deeply unequal society predicated on myths of meritocracy and prevailing beliefs that hard work will pay off. It explores how race, gender and most significantly geographic place impact their aspirations for the future, in the context of rising geographic inequality and an increasing focus on a “left behind” white working class. But, first, some context.

The “Neo-Liberal Revolution” and the Changing World of Work

The most obvious starting point is the onset of neoliberalism. Though a confused and contested term, we can broadly think of neoliberalism as a political and economic doctrine characterised—in theory—by minimal state intervention into the lives of its citizens.⁴ The late cultural theorist Stuart Hall usefully summarises the logic of neoliberalism as the notion that “the state must never govern society, dictate to free individuals how to dispose of their private property, regulate a free-market economy or interfere with the God-given right to make profits and amass personal wealth.”⁵ What Hall describes as the “neoliberal revolution” took hold with the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK (and Ronald Reagan the following year in the US), who went on to implement wholesale reform: reducing taxation, drastically rolling back welfare budgets, selling off national industries to the private sector, aggressively deregulating the financial sector and turning towards foreign direct investment (as opposed to state investment), all of which required a war on trade unions.⁶ This ideological drive was justified under the premise that low state intervention would produce better citizens. Under this logic, it was argued that high taxation punished the hardest workers, whilst supposedly plentiful benefits rewarded unproductive members of society and, crucially, disincentivised them from attempting to find work. As Thatcher famously declared in 1979: “Is it any wonder that people ask ‘Why work?’ when it can make little difference to your income whether you’ve got a job or not? How can anyone be expected to work harder if tax claws back what work puts in?”⁷

There were significant geographic implications to this revolution. The national economy was reorientated around the City of London through aggressive deregulation of the financial sector, notably what became known as the 1986 Big Bang that made London a global financial centre to rival New York.⁸ Construction on Canary Wharf, now a centre of global capitalism, began in 1988, with its first tenants moving in in 1991. That Canary Wharf's land is all privately owned (initially by a Canadian corporation), and that it exists in a part of London where working-class people were once employed as dock workers is a fitting testament to the changes that were setting in during this period. The reliance on a newly free financial sector went alongside increased infrastructure spending in the south of England, whilst much of the rest of the UK was left in a state of disrepair with little investment and crumbling services, all of which served to exacerbate what is often referred to as the north-south divide. At the same time, traditional industries outside of the capital suffered from the impacts of deindustrialisation, with two million industrial jobs wiped out between 1979 and 1983.⁹ It is important to note that these processes began before the respective electoral victories of Thatcher and Reagan. In the UK, manufacturing jobs were declining in the 1960s.¹⁰ Still, Thatcher and Reagan's embrace of neoliberalism massively accelerated these processes. Both the UK and US economies shifted from manufacturing economies to service-based economies, which relied on flexible labour markets with increasing numbers of part-time, temporary jobs characterised by limited security, the antithesis of industrial jobs, which were characterised by high levels of security—a job for life—pensions, strong bargaining rights and so on.

This had significant regional ramifications on both sides of the Atlantic. In the USA, industrial centres across what was once known as the Steel Belt—the area in which America's steel production was concentrated—from Gary, Indiana, to Flint, Michigan, were deindustrialised. With an embrace of automation, a turn towards outsourcing and the importation of cheaper steel from abroad, the Steel Belt became the Rust Belt, associated with urban decay, rapidly decreasing populations and high rates of unemployment. Writing about the collapse of the American Dream, political scientist Robert Putnam has

tracked how these processes played out in his home town of Port Clinton, Ohio, where well-paying blue-collar jobs were wiped out by the 1990s, leading to social dislocation, rising deprivation and the foreclosure of opportunities for local working-class young people who once could have lived meaningful and secure lives.¹¹ These processes were mirrored in the UK in former steel manufacturing regions like Scunthorpe, Middlesbrough and Sheffield (still known as the “Steel City”), in textile manufacturing regions like Greater Manchester in the north-west and in the collieries of the Midlands and the north-east. The mass unemployment wrought by these economic shifts has entrenched inequality and deepening structural poverty. What has followed reflects Doreen Massey’s description of “spatial divisions of labour”, wherein Massey argues that “different forms of economic activity incorporate or use the fact of spatial inequality in order to maximise profits”.¹² For Massey, and other geographers, centring the economy around the south-east of England necessitated a hollowing out of other regions (e.g., the former industrial bases of the Midlands, the north-east and beyond), creating a periphery and a core (everywhere versus the south-east).¹³ In the US context, we might think of the abandonment of the Rust Belt and the centring of the economy around the financial centre of Manhattan, New York, or the consolidation of a technological enclave around Silicon Valley in San Francisco. As Massey argues, “one of the main characteristics of the developing geography of capitalist societies so far has been precisely the development of new areas and the abandonment of old”.¹⁴ Here, the former industrial centres are abandoned in favour of cheaper exports from abroad, as capitalist production constantly moves on, resulting in “uneven geographies of development” within the USA and UK, and between nations across the globe, which impact how people migrate both internally and externally.¹⁵

The mass joblessness wrought by deindustrialisation and the embrace of neoliberalism went hand-in-hand with the removal of social safety nets, resulting in deepening inequality and poverty. This is what French sociologist Loïc Wacquant has described as advanced marginality: the poverty and social exclusion that have come to characterise supposedly advanced societies in the context of neoliberalism. Jennifer Silva’s ethnographic exploration in a former coal town

in Pennsylvania in the build-up to the 2016 US presidential election shed light on these processes, where once-plentiful working-class jobs no longer exist. She observes, “today, abandoned mine dumps and strip mines dominate the landscape”. People struggled to grapple with deepening poverty in this post-industrial landscape, as homelessness, crime and addiction became major social problems.¹⁶ Writing 30 years earlier, Chicago-based sociologist William Julius Wilson identified how these processes had a racialised edge, as in North Lawnsdale, Chicago, Black men were more likely to lose their jobs when factories shut their doors.¹⁷ These processes were similarly racialised in Britain; in the cotton mills of Greater Manchester and Bradford, it was Pakistani workers who faced higher levels of unemployment and joblessness, compounded by experiences of racism and resentment. Importantly for Wacquant, the response to this rising social unrest and poverty, wrought by the withdrawal of social safety nets, was the expansion of the state’s penal apparatus, which was intended to manage rising inequality.¹⁸ In the UK, Thatcher initiated a moral panic via the construction of what Stuart Hall and colleagues described in the late 1970s as the “black folk devil”: the supposed Black mugger, a motif used to justify increasingly repressive and often racialised policing.¹⁹ This can be best understood in the context of neoliberal statecraft; a moral panic was initiated to serve as a lightning rod for social unrest, whilst deflecting attention away from the real causes of increasing marginality. So whilst, on the one hand, Thatcher boasted the end of big government, on the other, she ushered in a new era of intrusive authoritarianism that specifically targeted vulnerable groups such as new migrant communities, famously warning in 1979 that Britain had become “swamped by people of a different culture”.²⁰ Immigrant communities found themselves being blamed for the rising inequality associated with Thatcher’s neo-liberal drive and for placing a burden on a welfare state that was in actuality being gutted by neoliberal restructuring.

Against this backdrop, it is worth briefly noting that Britain’s welfare state was historically paid for by its empire through taxation collected in the colonies that was then redistributed in Britain, as well as through imperially resourced warfare that funded infrastructure projects during the Industrial Revolution. This enabled low taxation in

Britain, which in turn helped foster national cohesion and quell any political unrest, as demonstrated by Gurinder Bhambra's work on colonial taxations.²¹ One of the core services funded by imperialism was the much-celebrated National Health Service, which is central to the conception of Britain as a socially democratic welfare state.²² This presents challenges today, given that the British state no longer has direct colonies to draw upon to raise money through taxation or warfare. It also offers important historical context for contemporary anti-immigrant discourses that are often framed around not just sharing space, but sharing resources, with immigrants situated as a strain on a welfare state which postcolonial migrants played a role in funding through historic taxation and then propped up through their labour.²³ The perceived strain on the welfare state is occurring at the same time that the welfare state is being deliberately underfunded and gutted, in the context of aforementioned aggressive neoliberal restructuring followed by austerity measures which continue to dominate the political imagination.

Beyond the material shifts brought on by neoliberalism, there were also fundamental changes in how people saw themselves, as well as one another. In particular, neoliberalism rested on the cultural trope of individual responsibility, through promoting the belief that the individual needs to be freed from government intervention to reach their potential within a supposedly meritocratic world order. As the American political theorist Wendy Brown observes, under the logic of neoliberalism, the "rational, calculating" neoliberal subject is supposedly able "to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions". In these terms, a failure to adequately provide for oneself is situated as a failure of the individual, who is believed to have "mismanaged" their life. Such positioning obviously ignores and erases the existence of structural impediments to mobility and self-actualisation.²⁴ Those on benefits are subsequently seen as being responsible for their own situations by failing to grasp the supposedly readily available opportunities to experience upward social mobility within meritocratic societies, all whilst being blamed for pressurising a welfare system that is deliberately underfunded. Then, being poor and being on benefits is situated as something to be ashamed of, associated not with structural drivers of inequality, but

personal failure, which in turn can be internalised, as poverty has a huge—and damaging—psychological impact on people.²⁵ Jennifer Silva’s *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* explored how these emergent neoliberal cultures of individualism, in a context of a lack of social safety nets, has created a “social climate of insecurity in which risks are increasingly redistributed away from the state and onto the individual, the freedom from tradition more often leaves them longing for the connections—and constraints—of the past.”²⁶ For working-class young people, social life is situated as a series of risks which must be carefully managed, with social mobility far from ensured. Still, neoliberal logic is so pervasive that it has convinced people to direct anger or frustrations inwards, rather than directing them towards those in power or towards the wider social structures that induce poverty. Similarly, work on elites has shown that upper- and middle-class subjects see themselves as being responsible for their own successes due to their talent and hard work which in turn naturalises inequalities through reinforcing a belief in meritocracy. This was drawn out in US-based sociologist Shamus Khan’s ethnographic study of an elite boarding school in New Hampshire. Here, young people from elite backgrounds obscured any advantages they had received through placing emphasis on their deservedness.²⁷

Higher Education and Prolonged Transitions

Before the onset of deindustrialisation and the turn towards a flexible service economy, it was commonplace for working-class young people to leave school at 16 (or 15 prior to 1972) to find readily available working-class jobs, just as my mum did in the late 1970s. This was the case for the working-class young men in Paul Willis’s seminal *Learning to Labour* (published in 1976), an exploration of how working-class boys got working-class jobs in industrial Wolverhampton (a West Midlands city that forms part of the aforementioned Black Country). With pre-ordained routes into work through familial and social networks, Willis found that these “lads” had little regard for education, as he described how “the ‘tumble’ out of school” predicated on “the prospect of money and cultural membership

amongst ‘real men’ beckons very seductively as refracted through their own culture”.²⁸ In a world where people lacked autonomy and saw the promise of affluence as potentially out of reach, working-class people (particularly men) were able to seek dignity through a sense of honest hard work, something that, for Harvard-based sociologist Michelle Lamont’s respondents in the early 1990s US context, was a source of pride.²⁹ The notion of dignity through work operates through the thick institutional and civic character of social life that is intertwined with this: factory, union, working men’s club, neighbourhood, pub and so on. The eradication of working-class jobs has gone hand-in-hand with the decline of these spaces, which has drastically impacted notions of community, togetherness and solidarity. There are now few places for people to commune as there were previously, which has been a theme explored in Jennifer Silva’s aforementioned work in Pennsylvania, where she identified the decline of marriage, the church, social clubs and political affiliations, all of which were now associated with betrayal. Robert Putnam’s focus on the decline of the American bowling alley as a metonym for the decline of community follows a similar thread. In the UK context, these discussions are most politically salient in relation to the decline of the English pub, which is often posited as a traditional working-class (read as white) establishment that is faced with extinction. Not dissimilar to Silva’s work, albeit in a UK context, Sacha Hilhort’s exploration of the former mining town Mansfield, in Nottinghamshire, looked at how the previously held social ties were broken after deindustrialisation, as leisure spaces and community spaces evaporated with the closures of the pits.³⁰ Deindustrialisation had a huge impact on people’s access to work but also on their sense of community, belonging and social ties. As Jennifer Silva summarises, the war on trade unions and the related embrace of neoliberalism have resulted in a context where previously held working-class attachments and modes of meaning-making have been “replaced by a fast-paced and flexible service economy, declining union membership and civic engagement, and a post-traditional, secular world”.³¹

Still, there is a romanticised dimension to notions of hard work and pride; work was often gruelling and socially undervalued and could be associated with humiliation from bosses. Such a framing

also has a particularly masculine slant. Women were notably excluded from these institutions—or their access was mediated only via their husbands—as were ethnic minorities such as my grandad (from the pub, the working men’s club, parts of the neighbourhood and for a time the union, hence the formation of the Indian Workers Association).³² Here, it is worth noting that though deindustrialisation dramatically increased the participation of working-class women in the labour force (albeit typically in poorly paid, insecure work), women were already widely working in the cotton mill towns of Greater Manchester, doing worse jobs for worse pay than the men.³³

The processes laid out in the previous section led to a drastic decline in readily available working-class jobs, which in turn has had significant implications for working-class youth and their ability to manifest a secure and meaningful future and achieve the traditional markers of adulthood, such as moving out of home or buying a house. Instead, as Jennifer Silva argues, young people are faced with “a rising tide of economic insecurity and social uncertainty that have transformed coming of age into a precarious journey with no clear destination in sight”.³⁴ The industrial jobs that, mainly, men used to perform prior to the collapse of the manufacturing sector in many parts of Europe and North America did not require many—if any—educational qualifications. Teenagers, like those interviewed by Paul Willis, would leave school and find work relatively easily. It is now much more difficult for teenagers to leave school and find immediate work, resulting in young people spending increasing lengths of time in post-16 education. In England, it is compulsory for young people to stay in education or training until they are 18, via going to college/sixth form or starting an apprenticeship, unless they are working or volunteering 20 hours a week alongside some sort of part-time education or training. In turn, the transition that young people make to adulthood is forcibly prolonged. A major part of this trend has been the rapid expansion of higher education provision in the UK (and beyond), which is linked to the expansion of a knowledge economy.³⁵ When my mum was a teenager, university was the preserve of the middle and upper classes who, unlike their working-class peers, would not be going into manufacturing or clerical jobs but would be going into more socially valued white-collar work. In the 1950s, only

3 per cent of the university-aged population went to university, a figure that grew to around 15 per cent by 1988 but ballooned to 50.2 per cent by the 2017–18 academic cycle.³⁶ A key moment was the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, which awarded university status to what were once known as polytechnics. This saw the number of universities in the UK grow from 31 to 134.³⁷ These universities became known as post-1992 universities and are distinguished from “old” universities, such as those in the “Russell Group”, a group of 24 universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, regarded as Britain’s most prestigious institutions. Similarly, in the USA, there is a distinction between undervalued but cheaper community colleges where young people often enrol on two-year degrees (known as associate degrees) and more prestigious state or private universities where students enrol on four-year bachelor’s degrees. As in the UK, where there is a higher graduate premium associated with Oxford, Cambridge and elite London universities, in the US, there is a higher graduate premium associated with what are known as “Ivy League” universities.³⁸

The expansion of higher education provision resulted in increasing numbers of working-class young people attending university, and the most recent huge increases in tuition fees in the UK have not abated university applications, which in part reflects the decreasing alternatives on offer for young people, a theme that will be explored throughout this book. However, the expansion of universities has decreased what was once known as the “graduate premium”, the additional earning power that is said to come with a university degree. With more and more young people funnelling towards university, a degree in and of itself no longer distinguishes between candidates as it once did.³⁹ It is now increasingly important to select the right degree at the right university to avoid falling into what sociologist Philip Brown describes as the “opportunity trap”, where an increasing number of graduates compete for a decreasing number of graduate jobs.⁴⁰ Here, it is worth stressing that there are spatial dimensions to the graduate premium; there are a higher percentage of graduate jobs in London, and in turn graduates who migrate to London earn more than those who do not. However, as Yang Yu, Sol Gamsu and Håkan Forsberg have demonstrated in their recent research on social and

spatial mobility for graduates, “Graduates from the traditionally working-class boroughs of South central and East London having lower chances of entering professional occupations soon after graduation”.⁴¹ So these processes are entrenched within London itself, dependent on class background and ethnicity, complicating the assertion that being in London confers geographic advantage.⁴² That said, research from the Paired Peers project, a longitudinal study of middle- and working-class students at Bristol and the University of West England, found that having a home in London, even for working-class students, can act as “an enabler for graduates”, given the proximity to potential graduate destinations in London, not least because this enables people to perform unpaid internships or low-paid work which would be impossible for working-class young people forced to privately rent in the capital such as those from Rochdale or Morecambe.⁴³

There are two core concerns for working-class young people that need attention. Firstly, the older universities, known as Russell Group universities, particularly those in London, are still associated with higher graduate earnings than other universities, with many recruiters targeting graduates from only the most prestigious institutions. However, working-class young people are much more likely to enter post-1992 universities (the former polytechnics), where drop-out rates are higher, and they achieve degrees that are often socially undervalued and so are not necessarily correlated with higher earnings.⁴⁴ This is similar to the USA, where working-class students are far more likely to enrol on two-year degree programmes. The second concern is that, even adjusting for attending the “right” university and selecting the right degree, much has been written in both the US and the UK about how middle- and upper-class graduates are able to dominate the labour market as a result of their ability to distinguish themselves from working-class or lower middle-class candidates through possessing the relevant social and cultural capital to appear as the correct “fit”. This includes possessing the relevant social networks, the ability to find and undertake unpaid internships and knowledge of the “right” extra-curricular activities required to stand out.⁴⁵ Working-class students are then doubly disadvantaged through being far more likely to go to a less prestigious university,

where a degree is not easily translated into a graduate job, and through failing to possess the relevant capitals required to distinguish themselves in a crowded labour market. Largely drawing upon the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this book is concerned with working-class young people who lack economic, cultural and social capital, which hinders their ability to plan for the future and navigate middle-class and elite institutions such as schools and universities. Broadly, social capital can be understood as social networks (e.g. parents and their social circles, which, as Jessica Hardie has shown, alter young people's inclination towards or away from work and university). These networks are also crucial for facilitating work experience or internship opportunities that are now prerequisites for many graduate jobs. Economic capital is access to financial resources (pocket money, money to pay tuition fees and accommodation, supplement loans, a home to return to on graduation). Cultural capital is an inherited understanding of how social institutions work and how to behave in different social contexts; cultural capital relates to the culture we embody, our accent, our tastes, our hobbies and interests, which are rarely acquired consciously but are rather passed on through familial osmosis over time. Deployment of cultural and social capital is increasingly crucial to navigating a crowded labour market, where a degree alone is now insufficient to secure a graduate job.⁴⁶

The expansion of higher education provision is often celebrated as a means to increase social mobility. Capturing the sentiment in 2015, then-US President Barack Obama described university as “a ticket to the middle class”. Similarly, former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair strived for 50 per cent university attendance as an antidote to inequality and more recently has argued that the UK should aim for 70 per cent attendance by 2040.⁴⁷ However, the link between a university education and social mobility is increasingly weak, not least because of some of the dynamics outlined above, as almost half of all graduates outside of London find themselves working non-graduate jobs.⁴⁸ University is then an increasingly risky and expensive proposition for working-class young people who are less equipped than their middle-class peers to navigate changing labour market conditions. However, as the book will explore, with the UK economy otherwise

geared around low-paid gig-economy work, there are limited alternatives for working-class young people as university is still correlated with slightly increased earnings, even if those are diminished, as more and more entry-level jobs now require a degree as a minimum barrier to entry.

Just under half of the students you will meet across this book's pages had ambitions to attend universities, which correlates to wider national averages. But what of the 50 per cent of people who do not go to university? With it now compulsory to stay in some form of education before turning 18, many of the young people I met studied a variety of diplomas, which are intended to prepare them for the workplace. Others undertook apprenticeships, some in traditional trades, such as plumbing or carpentry, and others in digital media and business, where they attend college for a few days a week and then learn on the job, earning some money at the same time. Apprenticeships are often talked up as a golden ticket for young people, but the dropout rate for apprenticeships was 47 per cent in 2023–4, equating to 115,000 apprentices a year.⁴⁹ Young people are then faced with difficult choices, as not going to university also bears risks within a changing labour market. Degree apprenticeships have been launched in a number of areas but are known to be incredibly competitive and remain undervalued compared to traditional degrees, and these are dominated by middle-class young people, whose parents are better adept at responding to changing conditions.⁵⁰ The reality is that increasing numbers of young people find themselves described as “NEETs”: not in education, employment or training. As of 2024, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) suggests that just under 1 million 16–24-year-olds are NEETs, 13.4 per cent of all young people in that age range.⁵¹

With the onset of neoliberal policies that have profoundly reshaped both the labour market and education, it should be abundantly clear that the promise of meritocracy is no more than a myth and subsequently that social mobility is as difficult as it has ever been in Britain. Rather than experiencing upward social mobility, poorer people are more likely to experience downward social mobility in modern Britain and many other parts of the supposedly developed world.⁵² Career destination is more dependent on family

background than any other factors. Stories of individual brilliance and resilience in the face of such a social context do little but obscure the realities of British society and compound social suffering, as people internalise their own failures, believing themselves or their parents to be deficient, when in reality the game was rigged against them. What matters most for a young person's life chances is their parents' occupations and level of wealth. Today we live in what historian Eliza Filhy describes as an "inheritocracy", where it is the "bank of mum and dad" that confers advantage onto young people and exacerbates unseen inequalities.⁵³ In modern Britain, those without any wealth to inherit following a boom in property prices and soaring inflation are most likely to be faced with a struggle to keep their heads above water. As Robert Putnam found in the US context, young people today find themselves in significantly worse positions than their parents, resulting in low absolute and relative levels of mobility. For Putnam, this is the collapse of the American Dream, which was supposed to reward talent and hard work but, instead, offers rewards based on who your parents are. In the UK, like the US, there are geographies to these processes, with spatial dimensions to unemployment options, particularly outside of London. However, rather than addressing the problem of neoliberal restructuring and unchecked capitalism, successive governments have done nothing but offer up scapegoats as inequality continues to soar, which takes us to the summer riots of 2024 that began in the faded seaside resort of Southport, some 40 miles south of Morecambe.

Place, Race and Riots

In August 2024, riots broke out across the UK following the murder of three young girls in Southport, a deprived coastal town in the north-west of England. This is somewhere once known as the Paris of the north, with it rumoured that Napoleon's time in exile in Southport inspired his eventual redesign of the Champs-Élysées in Paris.⁵⁴ Southport's shift from a place where local industrial workers would wind down to one of the most deprived towns in England made it a fertile ground for the riots that followed.

Disinformation quickly spread, with right-wing online figures with huge social media followings (including Andrew Tate and Elon Musk) repeating claims across their platforms that the murderer was an Islamic extremist who had entered the UK illegally by boat the previous year. A riot ensued in Southport, as hundreds of people gathered outside the local mosque throwing objects and chanting “English till I die” and “No surrender!”. Though the disinformation was soon dispelled—the murderer was in fact a 17-year-old Christian born in Cardiff (not lost on the British media was the fact that his parents were Rwandan)—similar riots broke out across the UK, as far-right groups latched onto this flashpoint. Middlesbrough and Hartlepool saw rioters attempt to set fire to asylum hotels as people watched on inside, no doubt terrified for their lives. The rioters shouted about “protecting our kids”. “England!”, “Fuck Paki’s” and “Get Out” were graffitied onto a hotel housing asylum seekers.

Those rioting were initially described by the BBC as “protestors”, and many politicians were keen to focus on their “legitimate concerns”.⁵⁵ The rioters, it was argued, were fighting back against being “left behind” and ignored amidst Britain’s apparent embrace of unconstrained immigration.⁵⁶ The term “left behind” has become shorthand for an exclusively white working class, usually living in former industrial centres, supposedly abandoned by an embrace of globalisation and subsequently multiculturalism, with many such places erupting in riots following the Southport incident.⁵⁷ As Richard Seymour writes in *Disaster Nationalism*, “The key word in the phrase ‘white working class’ tends to be ‘white’. The idea, implicit or explicit, is that these workers have a traditional moral claim as whites that have been ‘betrayed’”.⁵⁸ Betrayed by an amalgamation of characters and groups: the establishment, the political left, the woke elite, immigration, PC culture, successive governments. This focus on a racialised as white working class who have been betrayed has emerged with the most potency since the 2007–08 financial crash. Previously, class was rarely invoked within public discourse. It had been declared dead.⁵⁹ When a white working-class subject was invoked, they were positioned not as a “victim” but as a figure of disgust and abjection.⁶⁰ The racialised spectre of the “chav”, a derogatory term associated most commonly with a caricatured, predominantly white, working-class

person who was said to be an unruly trouble maker living off of benefits, had particular media prominence. The “can’t work, won’t work” was contrasted with the hard-working idealised citizen, the so-called *Mondeo man*: an emergent petty bourgeoisie who have taken their chances and pulled themselves up by the bootstraps, in contrast to the benefit cheat.⁶¹

Class is now firmly back on the map as a distinctively racialised category, which was made abundantly clear in the response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the USA and Britain’s decision to leave the European Union in the same year. Trump was apparently propelled to the White House by white working-class communities in the Rust Belt, who were fighting back against decades of neglect, with Trump pledging to bring jobs back to the region by resurrecting American steel production.⁶² Of course, he did not do this. Likewise, in the UK, it was said that white working-class communities in the north of England, an area where heavy industry was once clustered, delivered Brexit after years of being ignored by a London-based elite. American sociologist Craig Calhoun opined that “Brexit was a vote against London, globalization and multiculturalism as much as a vote against Europe”, going on to speculate that “arguably, the EU was a scapegoat for English anger at London, the version of globalization it has helped lead and symbolize and the politicians who have championed cosmopolitanism at the expense of solidarity with significant parts of their own country”.⁶³ Here, it is worth saying that geographer Danny Dorling’s analysis of the Brexit referendum offers an empirical counterpoint to these claims, as he argues, “contrary to popular belief, 52% of people who voted Leave in the EU referendum lived in the southern half of England, and 59% were in the middle classes, while the proportion of Leave voters in the lowest two social classes was just 24%”.⁶⁴

In the UK, the idea of a place-based revolt became even more pronounced after Boris Johnson’s 2019 electoral victory for the Conservative Party, which won multiple seats in the traditional Labour-supporting north of England—“known as the red wall”—when making impassioned promises to finally “level up” these neglected English heartlands with billions of pounds of investment.⁶⁵ Like Trump, he did not deliver on these promises. These motifs returned to centre

stage with the riots in the summer of 2024, where social class was mapped onto place in the coverage that followed. It was not racism, it was poverty, many argued, as if there were no connection between increasing deprivation and the ramping up of anti-immigrant sentiment in the media and by politicians. The theme of a white working-class fight back has been a core feature of what Richard Seymour calls disaster nationalism, “the apocalyptic nationalism that has swept several far-right leaders to power and is even now readying more breakthroughs”.⁶⁶ These disaster nationalists have had great electoral success from France to Germany and in the UK, where the “left behind” narrative has fuelled a broader shift to the right, influencing all major political parties at a policy and rhetorical level. Labour and the Conservatives try to outflank each other on immigration and other right-wing talking points, whilst Britain’s most visible right-wing party, Reform, surges in popularity, with eight MPs and a quarter of a million members as of early 2025, making Reform the second biggest political party by membership in the UK, close behind Labour. Moreover, the disaster nationalist message is predicated on revenge against the “woke mob”, the “elites”, the migrant and whoever else is deemed a worthy lightning rod for drastically declining social conditions.⁶⁷

Such a political moment, mirrored by the anti-asylum protests in the summer of 2025, ignores why people are seeking asylum in the UK in the first place, and why Britain has a large, long-standing non-white population. To repeat a much-cited phrase from the anti-racist writer Ambalavaner Sivanandan, “we are here, because you were there”.⁶⁸ What Sivanandan means is that early waves of migration to Britain were driven by Britain’s own imperial project. It is no coincidence that the majority of longer standing non-white subjects are from what was the British Raj (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), West Africa (Nigeria in particular, but also Ghana) and the Caribbean (particularly but not exclusively from Jamaica), many of whom initially arrived in 1948 as part of the Windrush generation (named after the ship that transported hundreds of passengers from the Caribbean to England in 1948). The early settlers arrived to fill labour shortages following the end of the Second World War and subsequent attempts to rebuild Britain and were later attracted to specific sectors that suffered from labour shortages.

It is well established that imperialism was predicated on violence and involved the impoverishment of the colonies through the extraction of resources and the geopolitical instability that went alongside divide-and-rule policies.⁶⁹ Major geopolitical flashpoints influenced the flow of migration to Britain, such as the partition of India in 1947, which split the British Raj into India and Pakistan and caused the displacement of millions of people; the subsequent Indo-Pakistan war in 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh and similarly created refugee crises; or the Biafra war in Nigeria in 1967, which similarly led to migration to the UK, to name but a few instances. Many of these people arrived in London, but also in other parts of Britain, dependent on the need for labour, as was the case for Punjabis in Birmingham or Pakistanis in Greater Manchester, and on the citizenship laws of the day. Much has been written by the likes of Satnam Virdee, Robbie Shilliam and Katharine Tyler about how the arrival of non-white citizens helped consolidate an English identity across previously deep fault-lines related to class, region and so on.⁷⁰

Migration to Britain today tends to follow colonial lines but also reflects global inequalities, including within Europe itself. As Les Back and Shamser Sinha write, “the legacy of Empire remains important, but this new intense phase of migration reflects the global economy’s need for greater mobility and cheap labour while, paradoxically, immigration is blamed as the reason for insecurities such as job and resource shortages.”⁷¹ The position of ostensibly white, Eastern and Central European migrants to the UK was brought to the fore in the build-up to, and aftermath of, Brexit, which was centred around taking back control of Britain’s borders from the European Union. After Brexit, people from Eastern Europe were targeted in hate-crimes and violence alongside longer standing non-white British citizens.⁷² Amidst the furore over “small boats” crossing the Channel (the stretch of ocean separating Britain from France), which has dominated the nation’s political landscape over recent years, it is rarely mentioned that many of those arriving are from Afghanistan, a country in which Britain was involved in a 20-year military campaign.⁷³ The anti-migrant backlash against old and new migrants has its roots in Britain’s failure to mourn a lost empire, what Paul Gilroy describes as postcolonial melancholia, but also a long decline brought on by

the aforementioned processes of neoliberalism, that in turn necessitated the construction of an underclass to blame for any social ills, and the austerity of the post-2008 financial crash era.⁷⁴ This economic context, where downward mobility is increasingly likely, has compounded a politics of resentment, where the migrant, most often the Muslim, whether veiled or otherwise, becomes the main target of unease and a representation of the threat posed to the nation, a drain on goods and public services and an alien presence aimed at disrupting an ill-defined English culture.

Additionally, the racialisation of the working class as white ignores how Britain's working class has never been a homogenous white entity. There is a rich history of non-white involvement in Britain's trade union movement, for instance. However, no attention is paid to the possibility (and reality) of working-class multicultural (conviviality in Paul Gilroy's frame), which is a regular feature in towns and cities across the UK, as working-class people of all backgrounds not only share space without conflict but see that racial difference is an unremarkable fact of social life.⁷⁵ Similarly, it is routinely forgotten that working-class subjects who were ostensibly white were never unanimously seen as white, with the borders of whiteness in the UK and USA constructed in relation to class, as well as other markers such as skin colour. Saree Makdisi's *Making England Western* demonstrates how ostensibly white English poor were excluded from dominant conceptions of whiteness, which were inextricably tied to notions of middle-class morality and values. These poor people were thought of by elites in the same demeaning terms as colonised subjects, situated as "savages" and as a race apart, who spoke their own separate languages. Poor English people eventually became white in part due to the end of the Empire and the need to construct a coherent national project in the face of two world wars.⁷⁶

As a crucial framing for the book, it is worth emphasising that the upscaling of private services and marketisation concomitant with the downscaling of public services leaves large swathes of the population vulnerable, which includes white people who happen to be working-class, who previously were insulated from the ravages of neoliberalism, not least through the prevalence of good working-class jobs. Hence we find ourselves in a situation that John Narayan describes

as “the wages of whiteness in the absence of wages”, which are predicated on increasing xenophobia and racist division.⁷⁷ The focus on the whiteness of the working class serves only as a means of managing discontent, and those championing these discourses show no real desire to tackle the inequalities that make life so unliveable for so many people across England. Crucially, it also provides necessary fuel to help build right-wing constituencies across the globe as disaster nationalists redirect wealth from the poorest to the richest in society and set about looting the very same states they decry as part of their anti-state rhetoric.

Cancelled Futures in London, Rochdale and Morecambe

Cancelled Futures is a book written against this broader context. It is about how working-class young people across three distinct locations, London, Rochdale and Morecambe, imagine their future transitions out of education and into the world of work. This book is based on interviews conducted with 62 working-class young people across these locations studying a range of courses: A-Levels, Level 1, 2 and 3 diplomas in a variety of courses from art to barbering as well as apprenticeships in plumbing, carpentry and digital marketing. The focus on London, Rochdale and Morecambe is intended to latch onto the wider focus on a “left behind” white working class living in former industrial sites (e.g. Rochdale) and English coastal towns (e.g. Morecambe). It is worth noting that Morecambe and Rochdale are two towns in Lancashire, a large county in the north-west of England, with connected but very different histories. Including both sites was important in order to move away from thinking about the north vs the south or London versus the rest, not least because the histories of Morecambe’s and Rochdale’s growth and decline are so different despite being intertwined.

Additionally, there is particular visibility, not least within policy circles, given to the educational attainment of white working-class young people—particularly boys—who are said to be the least likely to go to university and the least likely to get passing grades at maths and English GCSE. The UK government’s 2021 *Education Select*

Committee report, aptly titled “The Forgotten: How White Working-Class Pupils Have Been Let down, and How to Change It”, made much of “place-based disparities” which are “more likely to affect disadvantaged White due to the distribution of ethnic diversity in the country”.⁷⁸ This was similarly argued by the *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (known as the Sewell Report), which stated “it is the ex-industrial and mining areas, and towns on the coastal periphery, which are the poorest and least productive places”, going on to note, “it is the poorer White people, outside London, who are the largest group to be found in areas with multidimensional disadvantages, from income to longevity of life”.⁷⁹ Here, university attendance is used as a stand-in for social mobility, despite the aforementioned questionable link between university and social mobility and related evidence suggesting that, regardless of university attendance, white working-class boys earn more than their ethnic minority peers in the labour market.⁸⁰

The book starts in London, an example of a “successful”, “world” city, but as geographer Doreen Massey highlighted in the early 2000s, such wealth produces internal poverty and exclusion, as well as exacerbating regional inequality beyond London.⁸¹ The city is home to extreme and growing inequality, poverty and deprivation. Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Croydon and Islington are amongst the most deprived areas in England.⁸² The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that London had the highest rates of “destitution” in the UK, with people defined as destitute if they cannot “meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed . . . because they either lack necessities like clothing, heating, shelter or food. Or because their income is so extremely low that they are unable to purchase these items for themselves”.⁸³ In this light, it is unsurprising that one in four working parents living in London struggle to feed their family.⁸⁴ Life in London for working-class people is characterised by precarious work and insecure and potentially unsafe housing, alongside soaring prices for essential goods and services, counterposed by the immense wealth in the hands of a few who live parallel lives. London is also, as Les Back and Shamsha Sinha describe it, a “migrant city”, with over 40 per cent of its citizens born abroad, reflecting the aforementioned colonial flows of people and contemporary global

inequalities.⁸⁵ In this context, this book starts with an exploration of working-class young people enrolled at Park Walk, a college in one of London's poorest boroughs, which exists in the shadow of the City of London and Canary Wharf.

Following this, the book takes the reader 200 miles north to the Greater Manchester town of Rochdale. Rochdale was one of the first industrial towns in England, growing out of the imperial trade in cotton that was centred around the city of Manchester. Despite historically being one of the wealthiest towns in England, Rochdale has since fallen into decline following the harsh processes of deindustrialisation and the neoliberal turn away from manufacturing and towards a service-based economy. The town is home to a sizable Pakistani minority population who serve as a visual reminder that deindustrialisation was a multi-racial class experience. Relatedly, the town has had a consistent far-right presence and is unfortunately best known for its association with the racialised spectre of the "Muslim grooming gang". Rochdale is, in many senses, a left-behind deindustrialised town that, despite its proximity, feels spatially far removed from the boom of property development in Manchester city centre. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the only two colleges in Rochdale: an A-level college where students dream of university to enable a "career" they imagine outside of Rochdale, and a vocational college where students theoretically learn to labour within the town.

The book then turns its attention to Morecambe, a coastal town overlooking the Irish Sea almost 300 miles north of London. Morecambe is an archetypally deprived seaside town that was once a relatively popular tourist destination and has now followed the fate of many seaside towns across the UK. The decline of the British seaside is not obviously a story of deindustrialisation. There were no factories or warehouses. However, as historian John Walton argues, seaside towns were a type of industrial town, "with health and pleasure as its products", possessing an infrastructure of hotels, sea defences, promenades and so on. Walton suggests, "the development of the seaside holiday and coastal resort as commercial phenomena were part and parcel of the industrialisation process, growing in step with it and integrated into its interactions of demand and supply from the beginning, rather than being mere consequences or side-effects of a more

dynamic set of developments”⁸⁶ Morecambe grew as a tourist destination for mill workers in Bradford and Rochdale. Therefore, the eradication of manufacturing jobs in Rochdale (and beyond) had a knock-on impact on towns like Morecambe that relied on industrial labourers for tourism. These workers once sought to escape the hard realities of industrial labour in the entertainment worlds on offer at the English seaside, visiting theatres, cabarets, ballroom dancing and much more.

The English seaside town has a central role in configurations of Englishness, which works through nationalistic nostalgia and, relatedly, notions of racial exclusion.⁸⁷ Yet, they have since been “pronounced dead”, and they are places now characterised by high levels of poverty, crime, addiction and homelessness.⁸⁸ Hence the aforementioned policy focus on those living in coastal towns, who are said to have been “left behind” by the winds of social change: firstly, the aforementioned processes of deindustrialisation and, secondly, drastically shifting consumer habits that went hand-in-hand with neoliberal restructuring. Car and caravan ownership increased massively from the 1950s and 1960s, opening up other parts of the UK for working-class families and reducing the number of overnight stays at English seaside resorts. Over time, travel to warmer destinations abroad became cheaper. From 1973 to 1990 the value of tourism in Morecambe fell from £46.6 to £6.5 million, a remarkable decrease.⁸⁹ Yet, this has not been a natural decline but more of a managed one, the result of policies and mismanaged investment that have hurt the area and its residents. Today Morecambe is perhaps best known as the home of former heavyweight boxing world champion Tyson Fury, whose popular Netflix fly-on-the-wall documentary series *At Home with the Furys* featured various scenes in the town where the Fury family live. It is unfortunately also known outside of the northwest as the site where 23 Chinese people died picking cockles (an edible shellfish popular in coastal towns in the UK) on 5 February 2004, an incident that became known as the Morecambe Bay cockling disaster and that exposed a wider web of international people trafficking.⁹⁰

The impending social change and poverty within many seaside towns in England, combined with the reality that they tend to be

overwhelmingly white, have made them ripe for right-wing political parties. It is not a coincidence that four of the five Reform MPs represent coastal towns: Clacton, Boston and Skegness, South Basildon and East Thurrock, and Great Yarmouth. Many seaside towns have since been regenerated and even gentrified, especially in the south of England. Margate and Brighton are now “cool” enclaves with proximity to London, no longer reliant on tourism, whilst the not-so-cool Essex seaside towns of Southend-on-Sea and Leigh-on-Sea have been regenerated as commuter towns with fast transport routes into the City of London.⁹¹ Morecambe, though, is doubly depressed by a lack of tourism and significant distance from—and poor connections to—London and Manchester. It is, unlike London and Rochdale, nearly monoracial, with a 97 per cent white population. Chapter 5 explores how students in the town’s vocational college approach their transitions to work, largely through the postponement of the future.

These are three distinct places that may appear to be worlds apart but are intimately interconnected. We cannot understand England, or English inequality, without thinking through the spatial connections and discontinuities. As Doreen Massey argued in 1983, “national economic and social development, and national economic and social geography” are “closely linked”.⁹² Therefore, to understand inequality in any region, we have to think beyond that specific region, hence Massey’s assertion that local economies are “a complex result of the combination of its succession of roles within the series of wider, national and international, spatial divisions of labour”.⁹³ Here, we might think of Rochdale’s position as imbricated with the global colonial trade in cotton, linking the town to colonial India, enslaved people in the Americas and back again, not to mention Rochdale’s position within England itself. In turn, colonialism—including the inequalities it induced in the peripheries—is central to the migration of Pakistani workers to the town from the 1960s onwards. Additionally, we can understand the decline of the British coastal town, particularly Morecambe, as intertwined with the collapse of the UK manufacturing sector. The industrial workers from the textile manufacturing centres in Bradford and Rochdale who would visit Morecambe were beginning to lose their jobs. Places like Rochdale, once home to plentiful manufacturing jobs, became areas with high levels of

unemployment as the secure jobs of its industrial peak were replaced by insecure work in the remaining local factories and warehouses. At the same time, neoliberalism was setting in, drastically reshaping consumer habits. Here, we can think of economic geographer David Harvey's conceptualisation of "time-space-compression", a phrase that refers to how globalisation has accelerated processes through technological advance, making the world smaller and perhaps more accessible than it has ever been, including enabling cheaper holidays to warmer destinations abroad that might otherwise have appeared out of reach.⁹⁴ Morecambe then became a relatively undesirable place to visit, resulting in a drain of tourist revenue. The simultaneous turn towards cheaper production centres abroad, the embrace of foreign investment over domestic investment and the shifting consumer habits are tied into the recentring of the economy around the south of England, particularly the unregulated financial services in London. The spatial division of labour then shapes the spatial imaginaries of the young people you will meet across this book, whose aspirations work through perceptions of place. As Massey argues, if the "spatial is socially constructed, the social is spatially constructed too".⁹⁵

Remaining attuned to place, this book is written against dominant accounts of the "left behind". Rather than succumbing to a race versus class trap, my argument addresses the reality that the left-behind arguments have appeal and do, in fact, touch on something (even if what they touch on is misdiagnosed and misunderstood); it is a fact that white working-class young people (defined by the government as those on free school meals) do not get the best outcomes at school, which has a spatial dimension.

Those speaking of a left behind, in the UK, the US and beyond, do speak to processes of spatial, temporal and geographic isolation. Broadly, they draw upon four main strands that are worth elaborating on here: (1) white people are becoming what US-based political scientist Justin Gest describes as "the new minority", who will soon be "outnumbered", which is a concern politically and culturally.⁹⁶ Intentionally or not, these demographic arguments lend themselves to the increasingly mainstreamed White Genocide conspiracy theory, which has been cited by the perpetrators of numerous terrorist attacks, for example, the 2019 mosque shootings in Christchurch,

New Zealand, where 51 people were murdered by Brenton Tarrant, and the El Paso Walmart shooting the same year, where Patrick Crusius killed 22 people, as well as the 2022 Buffalo shooting, in New York, where ten Black people were killed by white supremacist Payton S. Gendron.⁹⁷ (2) White people have been ignored amidst a focus on minority rights and need their own protections. Hence, Eric Kaufmann argues that “racial self-interest is not racist”.⁹⁸ Others come to this position from a different angle, which is less racially charged and, put generously, more naive. For instance, Linda McDowell and Carl Bonner-Thompson’s research amongst working-class men, who happen to be white, living in English coastal towns (e.g. Morecambe) draws on a study of homeless Black women in Detroit to argue, “Young white men on the margins of British society deserve the same consideration. More importantly, they deserve financial and social support as well as new policies to challenge their economic exclusion”.⁹⁹ Their conclusions speak to the common-sense aspect of the “left behind” appeal, wherein they identify poverty and social exclusion amongst white men living in deprived coastal towns and fall into the trap of re-affirming point two, through suggesting (or assuming) that whiteness and poverty are somehow structurally connected. (3) White working-class people are sick of being lectured by “cultural elites” who champion cosmopolitan ideals, which are supposedly antithetical to working-class white interests, as working-class white people are assumed to be, if not racist, then inherently hostile to immigration and multiculturalism. For instance, academic turned GB News host Matt Goodwin has argued that being against immigrant controls is a “luxury belief” championed only by a “woke elite”, and firefighter turned political firebrand Paul Embery contends that the “left” are snobs and “despise” working-class people. Although written from different perspectives, US-based sociologists Joan Williams and Arlie Russell Hochschild separately argued that a nebulous “cultural elite”, comprising college-educated individuals who lived in large cosmopolitan cities, was responsible for the rise of Trump.¹⁰⁰ (4) There are geographic inflections to these processes. It is white working-class people living outside of major cities, particularly in areas previously associated with industry, who are most “left-behind” by the winds of change, including globalisation, deindustrialisation,

neoliberalism and immigration. Hence Justin Gest's focus on the former steel town of Youngstown in Ohio and former car-manufacturing site Dagenham, in East London, or the aforementioned Berkeley-based sociology professor Arlie Russell Hochschild relocating to Lake Charles, Louisiana, to overcome the "empathy wall".¹⁰¹ These processes were apparent in the responses to Brexit and in attempts to make sense of the 2024 race riots.

Taking a different approach, in his recent book, *Underdogs*, journalist Joel Budd attempted to tackle some of these issues head on, and though I am sympathetic to his pursuit, he is also guilty of overloading whiteness with significance, through making the claim that a "white working-class have particular problems".¹⁰² The problems confronting poor young people in parts of the UK are not to do with their supposed whiteness; we should always be careful about making culturalist arguments. This is about social class, place and related spatial realities of uneven geographic development across the UK. As I argue in chapter 6, the working-class young people I met who happen to be white, by which I mean they are ostensibly white and English, do not see themselves in overtly racialised terms as deserving members of a national community who are resentful of migrants. Instead they see themselves in local terms, which relates to how they understand their place within the social world. In turn, my goal was to think about the role place plays in framing the aspirations of all of the young people I met writing this book, across different scales, which means having race in mind but not assuming race when it does not help us see all things in all instances equally. The analysis in this book is then, in many respects, influenced by my friend Luke de Noronha's call to cut race down to analytic size, as he urges us "to get on top of the contemporary and make arguments rather than assume them".¹⁰³ Decentring race allows us to carefully consider the relationship between place and class and the establishment of a place-based class inertia. As I elaborate in chapter 6, this is not to be confused with an argument that race does not matter or that we should ignore the racial dimensions of social class. This book is written in the Paul Gilroy tradition of writing and thinking against race and against ethnic absolutism through attempting to foreground a shared experience of hardship that bound my respondents across social and geographic

locations.¹⁰⁴ In doing so, I aim to offer hope in hopeless times, by suggesting that a turn towards nativism is not a given. This is about refusing race to salvage the human.¹⁰⁵ This book is written against the nativists and disaster nationalists, but also against two-dimensional popular work on race that, as I outline in chapter 6, also obscures our ability to diagnose what is happening through overloading race with meaning, particularly in relation to popular conceptualisations of white privilege.

Defining Class

The book's focus is on working-class young people. However, class is a complex category and the aforementioned changes in the labour market have resulted in rapid class decomposition, making the old distinctions between classes more complicated and difficult to read. I measured class in this book through a demographic questionnaire, starting by asking them their nationality, their race and how they would identify their class, before getting them to explain the reasons for their answer (which they often struggled to do, as chapter 6 shows). Following this, I asked about parental occupation, parental level of qualifications and whether they lived in social housing or not. This approach follows other sociological attempts to determine class, such as that taken by Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison in their book, *Class Ceiling*.¹⁰⁶ The questionnaire was aimed at enabling me to garner the material conditions in which students grew up, as well as to ascertain the levels of cultural, social and economic capital the students had access to growing up, an approach that draws upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who heavily influenced this book, and that was emphasised in the British Class Survey.¹⁰⁷ I also asked about free school meal eligibility. Within educational research, class is often measured solely by free school meal eligibility (FSM). On its own, this can be a problematic measure as students must live in a household earning less than £16,190 which is a high bar for receipt. It ignores the many people who live in poverty but have slightly higher than threshold income, as only 16.7 per cent of children in the UK are eligible for free school meals. The figure is low when considering that in 2022 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that 14.5 million people in

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