

## Culture, Identity and Libraries

By John Pateman

In my last article, *Public Libraries and the Working Class* (ISC 20) I looked at working class use of libraries up to World War Two. This encompassed the golden age of the working class autodidact who used public libraries for self improvement, education and enlightenment. But working class use of public libraries was not a mass activity. With the advent of the welfare state the concept of universalism came to be applied to many public services, including public libraries. Libraries departed from their traditional roots of providing a service that was targeted at the “deserving poor”. From being a type of direct action, they became “neutral” and “open to all”. In the process public libraries came to be used heavily by the middle class, who tend to consume public goods out of all proportion to their numbers in society. In the shire counties in particular, public libraries were used as a form of subsidised novel reading by the middle class; fiction issues soared and public libraries took on the image of a leisure service rather than as a vehicle for the informal education of the working class. During the boom years of the 1950’s and 1960’s, book issues became the predominant public library performance indicator.

Universalism was enshrined in the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act which made it a statutory duty for all local authorities to provide a comprehensive and efficient” service for all those who lived, worked or studied in the authority. It wasn’t until the 1970’s that the original purpose of public libraries started to re-emerge, under the label of community librarianship. In authorities such as Lambeth, Manchester and Liverpool, public libraries developed outreach and other services which were targeted at the disadvantaged, the poor and ethnic minorities. This re-emergence was short lived and disappeared in the 1980s when public libraries adopted a more consumerist approach. Income generation became a big theme and a Green Paper was produced proposing that public libraries should become a charged for service. The pro-poor and self improvement ethic appeared again in the 1990’s, this time as part of the new social exclusion agenda. Its latest manifestation, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is the notion of a need-based service.

It seems that, no matter how many times the public library tries to re-invent itself, its original mission keeps re-emerging under one guise or another. This article will consider: what is social class and why does class matter?; the use of public libraries by different social classes; and what can be done to increase public library use by the working class.

### **What is class?**

“Sociologists who have stopped the time machine and, with a good deal of conceptual huffing and puffing, have gone down to the engine room to look, tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate and classify a class. They can only find a multitude of people with different occupations, incomes, status hierarchies, and the rest. Of course they are right, since class is not this or that part of the machine, but *the way the machine works* once it is set in motion – not this and that interest, but the *friction* of interests – the movement itself, the heat, the thundering noise. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly, or in isolation, but only in terms of relationship with other classes; and,

ultimately, the definition can only be made in the medium of *time* - that is, action and reaction, change and conflict.

When we speak of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same congeries of interests, social experiences, traditions and value systems, who have a disposition to behave as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways. But class itself is not a thing, it is a happening; it is a process of self discovery and of self definition.” (Thompson, 1963)

The fact that social class is difficult to define makes it a vulnerable, problematic and contentious subject. There are many aspects to social class. It can be viewed as a pyramid, or iceberg, only the top of which is visible. The outward, objective manifestations of class include income, occupation and lifestyle. But below the surface there are some very powerful subjective class forces, including identity, culture, behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, values and aspirations.

Class is also associated with history and politics: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other : Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.” (Marx, 1848). This association is used to connect class with political parties, or to dismiss class as something which was relevant in the past but is no longer pertinent today.

Class is still strongly linked with occupation. The Office for National Statistics has five categories of socio-economic status: managerial and professional occupations (eg teacher); intermediate occupations (eg secretary); small employers and own account workers (eg self-employed); lower supervisory and technical occupations (eg motor mechanic); semi routine and routine occupations (eg postal worker).

Income and lifestyle are also used as key indicators of social class. Some marketing companies such as Acorn use the following categories: wealthy achievers (Eg wealthy executives, aspiring singles); comfortably off (eg starting out, prudent pensioners); moderate means (eg Asian communities, blue collar roots); hard pressed (eg struggling families, inner city adversity).

Occupation and income are important economic aspects of class, and these can determine more subjective aspects: “The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.” (Thompson, 1963)

This introduces the cultural aspects of class: “I am convinced that we cannot understand class unless we see it as a social and cultural formation. In the years between 1780 and 1832 most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers. Class is a cultural as much as an economic formation.” (Thompson, 1963)

This in turn leads to class as an important aspect of identity: “Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate

the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs. Class is defined by men as they live their own history, and, in the end, this is its only definition” (Thompson, 1963).

Somebody with a high income and professional job may exhibit aspects of working class culture, behaviour and beliefs. Similarly, somebody in a low paid manual job may have middle class attitudes, values and aspirations. This is sometimes called false consciousness. Social class, like race, is self defined. If somebody considers themselves to be working class, then that is what they are. Class is about identity and self identification.

Attitudes and behaviour are increasingly being used as indicators of social class. For example, research suggests that children from middle class backgrounds are more likely to drink larger amounts of water. A survey of more than 5,600 children found that those who drank more water were more likely to show certain attitudes and behaviour that might be termed “middle class”.

Class is also about power, which provides a link to the notions of social inclusion and exclusion. Those who are socially included (the middle class) tend to have some power, to a greater or lesser extent; those who are socially excluded (the working class) tend to have little or no power.

### **Class and Public libraries**

Social class still matters because it is a key determinant of public library use. As *Investing in Knowledge* points out “27% of regular public library users are from social class DE, compared with 22% of the population as a whole” (Museums Libraries Archives, 2004). DE is a reference to the well known ABC1C2DE system of socio-economic classification. This system aims to measure employment relations and conditions of occupations. Conceptually these are central to delineating the structure of socio-economic positions in modern societies and helping to explain variations in social behaviour and other social phenomena.

One of the key recent publications which details the use of public libraries by social class is *Arts in England: attendance, participation and attitudes in 2001* (Research Report 27, October 2002). Between July and November 2001 the Arts Council of England and Resource commissioned Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics to carry out a survey of attendance, participation and attitudes to the arts. In total, 6042 people were interviewed in England.

This survey, which used the Office of National Statistics socio-economic status categories, found that during the 12 months prior to interview 45% of respondents had been to a library at least once, with around half of these visiting more than 10 times in the preceding year. There were significant differences in attendance by gender, age and socio-economic group. Women were more likely than men to have visited a library (50% had done so, compared with 41% of men). Those aged 16-24 (52%) and 35-44 (49%) were most likely and respondents aged 75 and over (40%) least likely to have been to a library.

Respondents from managerial and professional occupations (54%) were more likely to have visited a library than those from other occupations. The other figures are: 50% intermediate category; 37% small employers and own account; 37% lower supervisory and technical; 37% semi-routine and routine; and, 54% never worked / long term unemployed. Although not published in the report, the survey found that the largest proportion of public library visitors (39%) were from the managerial / professional category; the smallest proportion (6%) were from the small employers and own account category.

Library visitors were significantly more likely than non-visitors to have read for pleasure, bought a novel or other literary work, and written stories, plays or poetry in the past year. Of particular interest is the relationship between visiting libraries and purchase of fiction materials. 62% of library visitors had purchased fiction compared with 38% of non-visitors. This confirms previous studies showing a positive association between book buying and borrowing. This could, however, be related to socio-economic status; people in the professional and managerial groups were both more likely to go to a library and to have bought fiction.

In the 12 months before interview 73% of total survey respondents had read for pleasure. Respondents from the managerial and professional occupation group were most likely to have read for pleasure (85%) or bought a novel, work of fiction, play or poetry (66%).

Visits to libraries have conventionally been measured via analysis of official records kept by the location in question, or through specially conducted on-site “count” surveys. For both approaches, information is generally limited to estimates of simple “body counts”, without any contextual information regarding the social and individual characteristics of visitors. The Public Library User Survey (PLUS) can be of great benefit in understanding visitor profiles, but it is of less use when it comes to assessing the characteristics and motivations of non-visitors

*Examining public use of museums, galleries, archives and libraries: report on the 2000 UK Time Use Survey for Resource* (July, 2003) used interviews and time-use diaries. Interviews were completed, with all household members aged eight and over, during 2000 and 2001 at over 6,000 households, with over 11,000 individuals. 21,000 diaries were completed. Factors of age, sex, social class, region of residence and education were taken into account. “This is because these factors themselves influence both cultural participation and activity patterns.”

Using the diaries, the first statistically significant factor is age. The probability of visiting a library was greatest for those aged 45 and over and smallest for those between the ages of 16 and 24. Educational qualifications and economic activity are also important. Being unemployed or long term sick / disabled increases the probability of visiting a library, as does having a degree relative to all other qualifications. Not doing voluntary work and living in an area of high population density are also associated with visiting the library.

Looking at the individual questionnaire data, the higher the level of educational qualification, the higher the chances of visiting a library. For example, the probability of someone with no qualifications visiting a library is 24% compared to 48% for

someone with a degree. Similarly, having never worked or being employed in a routine or manual occupation reduces the likelihood of a visit, compared to being in a managerial or professional position.

### **Back to our roots**

It is clear from the above research that social class is a key determinant of public library use; it is also clear that public libraries are used more by middle class than working class people, compared to their proportion of the total population. So how can we increase the use of public libraries by working class people? Here are a few suggestions:

- recognise that social class, like age, gender and race, is part of people's identity. It is therefore entirely legitimate and necessary to collect data on library users and non-users regarding their social class, in the same way that we collect data about their age, gender and race. Use this data to target services and resources.
- recognise that social class is a cultural as well as an economic issue. There is a distinct working class culture which is different from middle class culture. Public libraries are associated, rightly or wrongly, with middle class culture. Regard working class culture as an aspect of multi-culturalism.
- identify and engage working class people in the planning, delivery and monitoring of library services. Use outreach services to identify, prioritise and meet working class needs. Set performance measures, success criteria and targets in consultation with working class communities, as part of a strategy to tackle social exclusion.
- ensure that social class is reflected in service strategy, structure and culture. Include social class in equal opportunity, cultural diversity and mission statements. Library staff, stock, services, buildings, technology, displays and events should be relevant to working class culture.
- Be advocates for and take positive action (not discrimination) in favour of working class people. Take public libraries back to their historical roots, when they were not neutral or universal, but explicitly pro-poor and disadvantaged.

As Jonathan Rose has observed, we have nothing to lose, but plenty to gain, from re-establishing contact with our working class communities:

“In Tony Blair's Britain as in many other Western nations, professionals in the creative industries have successfully reconciled bourgeois and Bohemian values. Affluent and ambitious, profit-motivated and style-conscious, they are sincerely committed to women's equality and genuinely interested in the literature, music, art, and cuisines of non-Western peoples. But the boutique economy they have constructed involves a process of class formation, where the accoutrements of the avant-garde are used to distance and distinguish cultural workers from more traditional manual workers. For both these classes, the withering away of the autodidact tradition has been a great loss. We forfeited some important knowledge about ourselves when we shut out or forget the working class observers of Bohemia. Even if they never caught up, they saw, more clearly than any of us, where our culture was moving.”  
(Rose, 2002)

In my next article in this series I will consider how working class people can be given real power and control of public libraries and how this could lead to the development of needs based library services.

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