

Working-Class Identity in Gillian Slovo's *The Riots*

هوية الطبقة العاملة في رواية جيليان سلوفو 'الأحداث'

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Doi: 10.37654/aujll.2021.171150**Abstract**

The image of the traditional working class has been shattered and replaced by Chavs image as a significant representation of the working-class in 21st century Britain. This paper aims to articulate working-class subjectivity and the struggle over the meaning of class in Gillian Slovo's *The Riots* (2011). It aims to investigate working class culture as a significant interest that determines workers' life chances in modern society. The paper consults Bourdieu's main concept Habitus and Owen Jones' book *Chavs: The Demonization of the working class* which explores the class hatred during Thatcher's years. Working-class individuals become unemployed, drug abused, and criminals, eventually were forced to live in poverty of mind and body. Working-class individuals find themselves out of their works because of the government policy that plans to destroy them to remove any power that stands against their political decisions. Working-class individuals behavior, their language and taste become the main standards to identify their identity. Finding this new discourse is not a demonstration of poverty,

exploitation and oppression or even alienation but the reflection of one's deviation and behavior.

Keywords: Chavs, Slovo, *The Riots*, Beaurdieu, Working Class

Introduction

Working-class identity is the subject of investigation and analysis for many sociologists and theorists like Marx, Weber and Bourdieu who showed an interest in class and class struggle in different times and circumstances. To analyze class one should know what is meant by class. The term Class refers to the group of people who live in a specific area and share the same identity. People's identity is a significant sign used to identify one class from another. What is meant by identity is the same attributes, habits and common values which label a group of people. Working-class acquired their identity as their circumstances are labeled by other classes or groups.

In Britain and other industrial societies only two classes are clearly recognized, the rich who own power and privileges of social, cultural, economic and even political aspects. While the poor own nothing but their labors, they are exploited, oppressed and dehumanized. The relation between these two classes based on commodity. In the past the class frame associated with means of production only which determined the relation between two contrasting classes. The capitalists whose identity is derived from their power live as superior due to their property and education. Their ideology has a great impact on the working class consciousness who inherited the sense of inferiority and live to sell their efforts to survive. In the Nineteenth and Twentieth century, Working-class became tools used to operate machines, they had to work continuously with low wages which were not

enough to provide their necessities. They lived in unhealthy condition, suffering from starvation and poverty. Men, women and even children were dehumanized and enslaved by the capitalists who desire to increase their wealth. The workers accepted their fate as slaves, having no chance to improve their own lives or receive education since education is exclusively restricted for rich people. They were victims who need to protest to change their conditions. They realized that they have to own the means of production and live in a new society that should be based on equity. Their self-realization enabled them to achieve their goals, so they established trade union through which they can express their desires. Their voices started to be heard and their conditions were improved. Working-class became a respected power, they were proud of themselves (Wanger, 2015).

Working-class prosperity has declined due to the development of technology and the invention of new machines that demand professional and skillful workers. As a result mines and the traditional industries have been closed and the manual workers find themselves jobless. Gradually the Working-class started to lose their power, their image as a historical maker is shattered and their universal society is ruined. The value of working class has declined as their effort is no longer the source of their power and activity “technical progress is a costly affair, involving the replacement of human labor by machines or wages by capital” (Gorz, 1997, p.126).

Working-class people are blamed for being poor and identified as defective consumers, criminals, and failed underclass whose part plays no role in their society. They have no effective part in the society as they are considered as the groups who are not known out of their poverty. Their identity is associated with chav image in which, language, habits, life style, and

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dressing are easily identified and labeled as an unrespected group. This new discourse is a reflection of individual's weakness, deviation and failure rather than alienation and exploitation (Adiseshiah 2016). Working-class struggle and identity crisis are well investigated and analyzed in Marx, Weber and Bourdieu's theories.

Bourdieu indicates that habitus is not acquired through secondary educational process. It is defined as a property of social agents that reflects family nature and educational experience. Gender, ethnicity and tendencies of individual's class is known informal habitus which represent unconscious socialization, while the conscious or formal development of habitus is depicted by education. Habitus is different from habits since it produces number of behaviors in different fields (Gilbert 2019). Habitus is "deduced either from the present conditions which seems to have provoked them from the past conditions which have produced the habitus" (Bourdieu 1990, 56). Habitus shapes individual's practice in present and future besides shaping their identity. So the interaction between self and social structure is an integral relation. They shape each other and habitus is no more than a consequence of this interaction (Maton 2008):

The conditions associated with particular class of conditions of existence produce habitus, systems of durable transposable dispositions. Structured as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adopted to their outcomes without an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Shusterman 1999, p.77)

The habitus of Gender and ethnicity recognized their own identity "gender identity is deeply rooted, bodily anchored dimension of agent's habitus. It

affects the individual in the most natural parts of life his or her identity" (Krais, 1993, p.170). In neoliberal society individual's identity is associated with his choices. Consuming individuals are separated from class formations and other collection. David Harvey states that "neoliberalism, in short, has meant the financialization of everything" (2005, p.33). In modern society, the groups of identities replace the class interest just like cultural discrimination over economic interest. This process warns danger and may lead to oppression and exploitation besides opening a new phase of competition and disadvantage among groups (Sveinsson 2009). Bourdieu suggests that the habitus of Working-class is different from the elites and middle class. Working-class habitus makes ineffective strategy because they are having imperfect conception of the field. Habitus embodied culture acquisition and one's interaction with his environment which leads to class division (Gilbert 2019).

The study explores the presentation of Working-class as a subject of dramatic interest in the Twenty- first century. New identity of the working class has been strongly reflected on some stages of British theatres, particularly after the damages of globalization for both social and economic aspects, specially the period between 1980s -1990s. Many plays tackle the cultural interest as the main factor in shaping one's identity. This paper explores Gillian Slovo's *The Riots* by highlighting the working class language, habits and their behavior.

Methodology

In classless society the image of powerful and respected class is changed to Chav image which is the core of the current study. In order to grasp the new identity of the working class, the current study considers

Pierre Bourdieu's Field theory, focusing on (habitus) the main concept of his theory. Along with Owen Jones' book *Chav: The Demonization of working class*. The study applies these two concepts to Slovo's *the Riots*.

Bourdieu believes that culture and economic capital are the main elements that determine one's position in his society. He focuses on Habitus as a central concept in his theory. According to Bourdieu habitus is a property of the social agent, it is the core of disposition. He contends that Habitus:

is not only a structuring structure which organizes practices and perception of practices but also structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organized the perception of the social world, is itself the production of internalization of the social classes. (Shusterman, 1999, p.77)

Bourdieu believes that one's educational experience and the family upbringing will influence his future practice that shapes his identity. Habitus, for Bourdieu, does not work alone, it is a result of interaction between individual and his society. So the interaction between inner (self) and outer(society) will shape each other. Bourdieu intends to use habitus as a medium between objectivism and subjectivism to overcome the dichotomy between outer and inner condition (Fuchs, 2003). For Bourdieu the habitus rings together "the dialectic of the internalization of externality and the externalization of internality" (Bourdieu, 1977, p.72). According to Bourdieu the culture with the aid of economic interest are important factors in mapping class division in capitalist society (Riley, 2017). Habitus determines the practice of people, their language, dressing, food, music, sport, and other experiences. So the families of the working class are

completely different from the families of the middle class and elite in their everyday lives.

On the other hand, Owen Jones in his book *Chav* investigates the causes and motivations of the new identity of working-class. Jones also focuses on the political role that attacks working class and changes them to jobless individuals. Having no opportunity to get enough knowledge or gain a higher education, the poor workers are obliged to live under the line of poverty and become undesirable part of society. They are no more victims but responsible for their choices. Jones describes Chav as an image referring to whole negative attributes that identify a specific class. It is used to label working-class due to their offensive language, their eating, drinking, their way of dressing, and using jewelry... etc. Chav according to Jones refers to the feckless, brainless, drinker and criminal.

The working class is unable to live in harmony with others. The people who belong to working-class are identified as criminals and source of disorder. Jones describes Chav image as hopeless working class:

the chav caricature has obscured the reality of the modern working class. We are fed the impression of more or less comfortable middle England on the one hand while on the other the old working class has degenerated into hopeless chav rump. (Jones, 2011, p.39)

Owen Jones also describes the poverty as the main location of working class, the place where the criminals, rioters and looters emerge from.

Discussion

Society drama reflects the important issues of Modern age. It is considered the mirror that—reflects the reality of people. Therefore,

contemporary dramatists manipulate their writings to make the audience understand what happens in the world. Slovo is a distinctive figure in modern theatre, she devotes her life to write about socio-economic crisis and working-class position after social mobility. Her play *The Riots* highlights the tension between the ruling class and marginal groups in the UK. It also reveals the causes and motivation behind the riot in 2011 in London and other cities. The play explores the identity of rioters and how they are identified due to their appearance, language and some habits.

The Riots (2011) deals with working-class identity in modern Britain and elevated individual's capacity and morality. Slovo's *the Riots* is based on real events that happened in summer 2011 in the UK. These events attracted the attention of different critics and philosophers and many dramatists who are inspired by the Summer events. Slovo depends on the testimonies of individuals who either participate or trace the events.

Slovo explores multi causes that sparked the riots and make the young from different cities around London united against the policemen and ruling class. They are seen as a barbaric groups who belong to the third world. They are just like invaders who conquered the cities. Zizek described them as "outside the organized social sphere prevented from participating in social production who are able to express their discontent only in the form of irrational outburst of destructive violence" (2012, p.53).

The actors who perform the role of rioters are not given names, they are anonymous (man 1, man 2, and later man 3). Their role is performed in the darkness, their voices are too low and hardly heard on the stage unlike the other actors. Slovo intends to represent the rioters on the stage in such strange way to reveal their position in their society. The stage direction is

manipulated to create the division between them and the audience. They are treated as other and unwanted group in the UK:

Dark and silent. Man1 and Man 2 on the stage but they cannot be clearly seen. It's almost if they are disembodied voices. They are rioters and like Man 3, who comes later , they should be separated from the rest of the characters. They are other. A world apart from the audience. (Slovo, 2011, p.7)

The fragmented dialogue of the characters on the stage and their lack of interaction reflect their fragmented society. They do not respond to each other or comment to each other, they only introduce their opinion towards the riots (Kabo, 2011). In the play, the identity crises of the working class is depicted in such a way that make the audience recognize them easily. The working class otherness reveals how the dominant class declassified the poor. Claiming that they deserve to be punished since they accept their and reject development.

Bourdieu states that "a group's presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognized, to get itself noticed and admitted and so to win a place in the social order" (1984, p.48). New generation of unemployed working class is the consequence of mobilization. The young live in harsh circumstances, they have to gain knowledge if they want to be part of middle class or they will live as unwanted group in the society. They split between their traditional life and the life they want to be part of. They are deprived of their rights and separated from their society as if they belong to nowhere.

Social, economic and political changes have great influence on working-class identity. These powers are the main focus of Slovo in this play to implicitly convey how the rioters who belong to working-class are labeled. They are judged regarding their own behavior and their way of dressing, neglecting the main reason that drags them to bottom:

society has created a society of looters at every level [. . .] corporations not paying their taxes, and all this was, was kids with the same moral values that have been inculcated in society motivated by the some level of consumerism, um coming out and seizing their opportunity. (2011, p.53-54)

The rioters are identified as looters but they loot their own necessities, food, clothes and some materials that they cannot buy though their behavior is rejected, they have their own justification in which they convinced some people.

Slovo is one of those people who feels sympathy towards the rioters. She implicitly blames the government that could not understand those young or at least offers them a chance to improve their life conditions or to escape from their misery. The poor are out of government's consideration "I don't [blame] the last government particularly, I blame a whole series of governments who have failed to recognize that what was going on underneath our nose was the creation of a subculture" (2011, p.58).

On the other hand, Owen Jones criticizes the government's policy that shape new caricature of working class which carries the whole negative attributes. The ruling class creates social division for its profit. Jones argues that "people at the top have become more talented or more profitable [. . .] the

smashing of the trade unions a hire –and five force, and the taxation system rigged be benefit the wealthy" (2011, p.146). Sain Adishiah also believes that the government intends to function all its power to describe the rioters, who belong to working class, as a gang whose only aim is to bring unrest to Britain, "working class youth acting out different scripts of simulating alternative subjectivity by breaking curfew, congregating in crowds [. . .] seizing consumer goods" (Adishiah, 2016, p.163).

Owen Jones believes that most of the workers who are kicked out of their job, either committed suicide or become alcoholic or inflict violence. They are just like a nightmare that should be ended. They are no more than a group of unwanted people that must be separated from Britain society which involve "family breakdown, welfare dependency, failing school, crime, and the problem that we see in too many of our communities " (Jones , 2011, p.194).

At the same time, Bourdieu states that "the distribution of the different classes thus runs from those who are best provided with both economic and cultural capital to those who are most deprived in both respects" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.114). The rioters lack both cultural and economic interest that make them undesirable group. Slovo depicts the rioters and their violence as angry people who translate their frustration in form of chaos and disorder;

It's mindset that says that we are treated unjustly, we are never gonna get respect, we're never gonna get the dignity that we want, so let's go and just take the things that we want. (2011, p.44)

The tension between rioters and the police can be understood as racial riots because the police has killed black man. Normally, the main job of the police

is to protect the people and reduce the tension with different groups to enhance their trust of the police role in the society. Slovo highlights this tension to focus on the division between social rank and how the society judges the person due to his ethnic identity.

Looters make an advantage of the riot by getting free materials since most of them have no money to buy their basic needs. Their deprivation is a significant factor behind the riot. Men, women and kids who belong to underclass have stolen the materials needed in their life. Like food, clothes, cigarettes and phones (Newburn, et al., 2015). This fact is well introduced by Slovo in the play:

One was a mother testing the shoes, um, for her child outside the JD Sports, fact that you're you're , you're looting and you're testing shoes, for-for your child! The other one was , um, was in the McDonald's , [. . .] started making themselves food. (2011, p.31)

The young are deprived of their right to live in dignity, they are alienated from the middle class. They become a marginal group because the lack of privileges that make them a forgotten group. This sense creates individuals with physical and psychological problems that push them to practice violence and destruction (Briggs, 2012). In most cases the deprivation would not create criminals if the individuals have a chance to improve their conditions in order to look for better future. Otherwise, the deviant behavior will become part of their lives . The government describes those young as gangs whose destruction is motivated by nothing rather than greed or other excuses.

The Riots portrays the prejudice in modern Britain towards the minor groups which includes not only the black but even the white to create division based on cultural criteria. The skin color is not as important as individual's capacity and culture. Working class with all its race is labeled as chav. Ethnicity is used to identify social classes and the subject that Slovo focuses on. The Working class whether white or black are sharing the same habitus, same style and place. The play depicts the riots as the reaction of young people of working class and not race riots as some expect, since Slovo's main concern is the identity of working class. The white workers start to imitate black in their behavior where both are described as gangster. David Starkey does not blame the black only for their evilness but also the whites who have shared the same sense. He argues that "Chavs [...] have become black. The whites have become black. A particular sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic, gangster culture has become the fashion" (Cooper, 2012, p.8).

The rioters also are depicted in the play as looters who break the law as they find chance:;

I made like a good three trips, took clothes, Jewelry, electrics. I even took a-a-a- DVD-box set of um Harry potter an' I don't even like Harry Potter, never wanna see the movies in my life but cos it's there I know it's free so I'm takin' it. (2011, p.23)

Socio –economic inequalities create a division between middle class and the lower group of ethnic identity which has been racialised in capitalist society. Claiming that the government is the source of their suffering and fate, both black and white have shared the same fate.

Summer 2011 offers the people opportunity to understand the circumstances of new generation of working-class. The events also create opposite reactions towards the riots and the rioters. The rioters are depicted as a greedy underclass who are not satisfied with robbery only but destroy and burn the buildings. They are like a barbaric conquest whose goal is to bring unrest to Britain. *The Riots* offers no direct answers to the questions that may rise in the mind of the audience, but to introduce the causes and the motivation that sparked the riots one can easily find the answers for all his questions. Economic, social and cultural divisions are the consequences of capitalism which create the top and bottom. The working class is always a subject of exploitation and dehumanization.

Jones introduces his opinion about the riots in which he blames the government in creating division in the society. He claims that the government does not attempt to understand those young or at least provides their simple necessities in order to put an end to the riots. Jones believes that the riots will never end in the country of injustice and inequality (2011). He describes the rioters at the end of the play as "faceless, dehumanized, unexplained" (2011, p.58). The individuals of working-class are blamed of being poor, they are responsible for their suffering since they are not able to cope with social development. They do not have enough skills that enable them to change their life or improve their wages. Jones believes that the low wages are not enough to provide their own basic necessities, so they are obliged to live in poverty with gangs and criminals. The cheap rent, dirty dwells, with gloomy painting and noisy streets are not the choice of working-class.

Poverty creates disrespected and unwanted figures who are identified as criminals "the living standards of some working –class people are lower than they would have been if they were paying cheap council rents rather than often very expensive mortgages" (Jones, 2011, p.143). Workers' kids grow up with criminals in an environment completely different from the environment of middle class. These differences shape the identity of both classes that depend on language (whether formal or slang) and the taste that includes sports, music, food, furniture, clothes and so on. Such habitus generates one's disposition and provides the life chances that distinguish one's rank.

Bourdieu argues that "out of very similar incomes, the manual workers spend more on food and less on everything concerned with personal appearance and care" (1984, p.394). Slovo depicts the rioters due to their appearance and reveals people's attitudes towards their appearance. The rioters wear masks or hoodie and cover their faces in order not to be identified. Hoodie is associated with violence and destruction. Such characteristics are parts of Chav image that labeled the rioters who belong to working-class (Bell, 2013). Slovo mentions the hoodie implicitly in the play and associates it with rioters' identity though they hide their faces:

I took my drum and started playing. I just thought, why not? I just wanted to see what would happen. The place looked over curiously . But I think they just looked at me and thought, 'He's in Birkenstocks. He's not really a threat' it's funny because since I changed my , my way of dress, I didn't really get stopped by the police. (2011, p.19-20)

The events of *The Riots* are personalized by Slovo due to the testimony of the center narrative Mohamed Hammoudan who lives with his two kids in a

flat above the carpet right shop. Hammoudan tells his story during the events when his flat has been burnt and his attempt to save his kids from the fire. In the first part of the play Hammoudan appears to narrate the events of riots just like other witnesses:

I can see smoke coming through the skirting boards down from carpetright. There is a fire . And there's so much commotion outside . It felt like an eternity to wake [Karim]up I wasn't in a panic. I was more thinking 'I need to get these two out. (2011, p.20)

The message is sent to the audience after Slovo changes the role of Hammoudan in the second part of the play. He sits apart observing silently the activities of the people on the stage, the rioters, police, doctors, kids, women etc. They randomly react towards the disorder in their city "through this second half Mohamed Hamoudan sits and watches. He is separated from the rest cast. He is listening to these thinkers, these politicians, community activities and rioters who are on the stage trying to explain what happened" (2011, p.35). But Hamoudan's character is visible in each part on the stage for both the audience and the actors. His voice represents the conscience of the play and Slovo's implicit opinion towards the riots. The play ends with Hamoudan's three words "Just angry people" as a last judgement of rioters. These three words arouse the sense of sympathy towards the rioters, their condition is unbearable, they need to express their anger, to raise their voices against the injustice and must put an end to the history of demonization.

Jones also focuses on the policy of ruling class in creating the chav image of working-class. Supporting their plan by using the media in all its kinds to

justify the fight against the working class and shatter their old identity. The media becomes integral part of the society, it is the way of communication among people. It helps the government to create new identity of working class and portray the workers as poor who reject to change their own situation and climb social ladder to be a respected group. Jones admits that media participates in demonizing the working class "the media using an isolated case to reinforce the chav caricature: feckless, feral, and undeserving. But it was far from the last. Now that the ball was rolling, the media enthusiastically seized on the cases to confirm this distorted poverty" (2011, p.23).

Conclusion

This paper explores an important issue in Britain in the Twenty-first century. The working-class identity is an important subject in the capitalist society like Britain that attempts to create classless society by relying on the middle class as a major class. The term of class re-emerges in recent years as a major category in Britain.

The paper also tackles the circumstances that push the unemployed to protest against the government. It highlights rioters who belong to the working-class that suffers the injustices and inequalities. Those rioter are depicted by the government and the media as gangs and looters with irrational thoughts. *The Riots* depicts the real event that took place in the UK during 2011. The analysis of this event in light of Bourdieu's habitus and Jones' Chavs indicate that the poor do not deserve to be part of the society since they are the source of chaos and destruction. The study concludes that the rioters' behavior, language, and their appearance are the references of their identity in which they lived as strangers with unheard voices. It can also be concluded that the

working class individuals are sharing the same habitus and life style that makes them unwanted outcast and must be removed from the area. They are depicted as lazy, drug-dealers, daredevils and lusty members. The poor are not given the chance to improve their lives so they are forced to escape from their suffering by using drugs or practice negative activities.

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