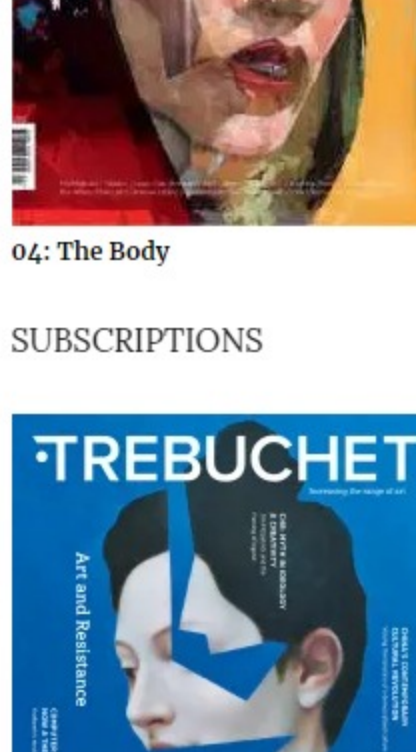


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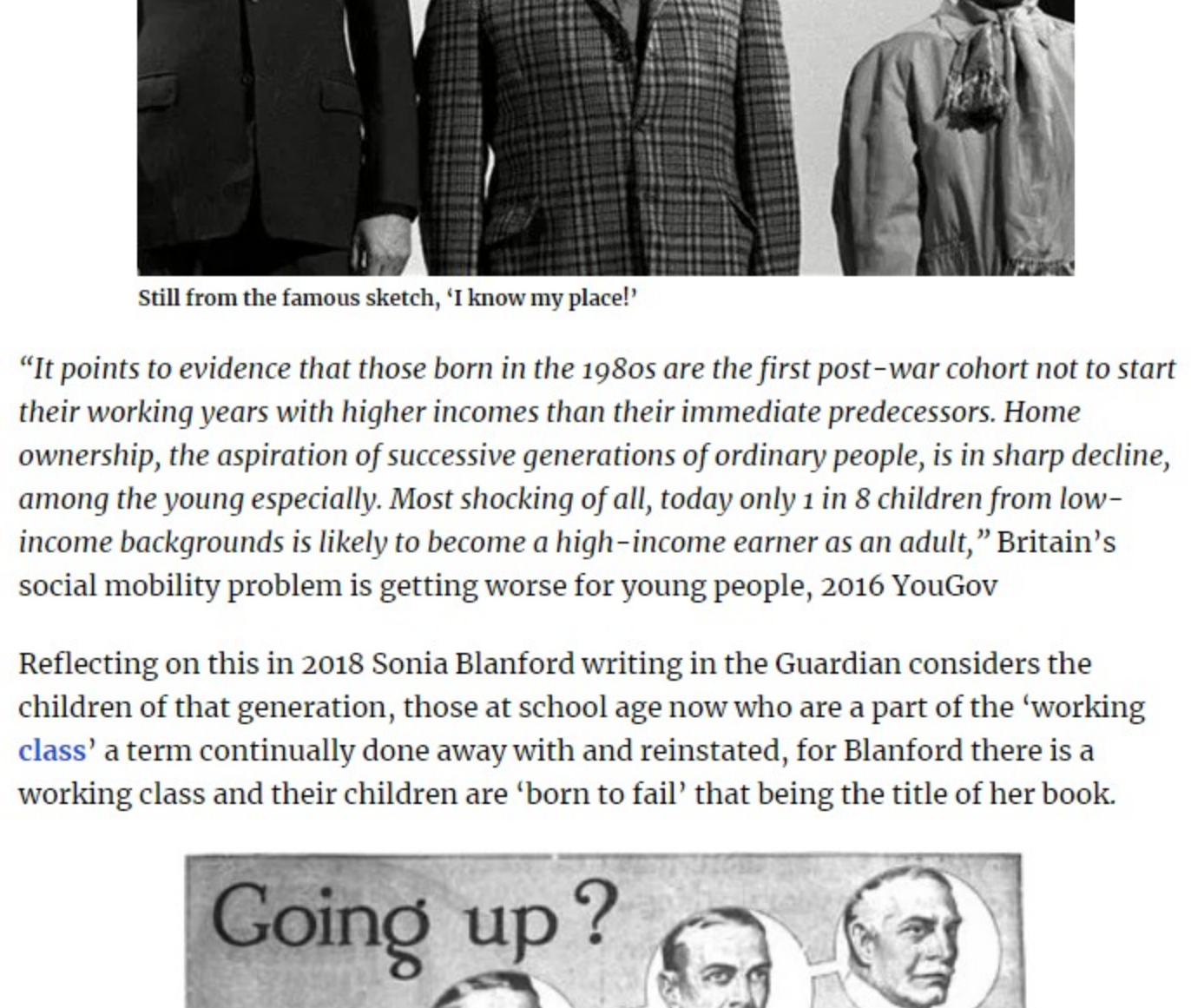
## What the Dickens! The End of the Social Climber?

SLOWING DOWN TO STOP SOCIAL MOBILITY AND THE UGLY TRUTH

09/03/2018 • Michael Eden • News, Society



In 2016 a press release on the YouGov website confirmed what was self-evident across the UK. Social mobility was in sharp decline and a new wealth/class plateau was being established. This is largely due to the cost of living, rent, food, transport was and is exasperated in Britain where the idea of home ownership has evaporated for an entire generation.



Sell from the famous sketch, 'I know my place!'

"It points to evidence that those born in the 1980s are the first post-war cohort not to start their working years with higher incomes than their immediate predecessors. Home ownership, the aspiration of successive generations of ordinary people, is in sharp decline, among the young especially. Most shocking of all, today only 1 in 8 children from low-income backgrounds is likely to become a high-income earner as an adult." Britain's social mobility problem is getting worse for young people, 2016 YouGov

Reflecting on this in 2015 Sonia Blanford writing in the Guardian considers the children of that generation, those at school age now who are a part of the 'working class' a term continually done away with and reinstated, for Blanford there is a working class and their children are 'born to fail' that being the title of her book.

"Getting education right for working class children remains a challenge in many schools. As a working class professor, it's something I think about a lot. Theresa May has already admitted that the education system is failing to serve the needs of every child and that the odds are stacked against working-class pupils. The team behind the BBC's new Generation Gifted series, which follows the lives of six disadvantaged 13-year-olds, say they were inundated with headteachers keen to highlight the uneven playing field that bright, disadvantaged pupils face compared to wealthier children." Sonia Blanford, 'Born to fail? No. But working class children do need help to succeed' March 2018 Guardian.com



Illustration from a 1916 advertisement for a vocational school in the back of a US magazine.

Charles Dickens, 1812-1870 perhaps no-one did more to develop the nation's empathy in recent history

"...so foul and stifling as to be, first, almost insupportable," Charles Dickens, 'A Sleep to Startle Us' 1852

Clearly Dickens saw the situation at the time as inhumane, an environment which could hardly enable education but was hostile. The piece is clearly sympathetic, a call for action regarding the alarming state of education for the poor but this does not deter an honest and unsentimental description of the pupils,

"...low browed, vicious, cunning, wicked...they could not be trusted with books," Ibid



Charles Dickens, 1812-1870 perhaps no-one did more to develop the nation's empathy in recent history

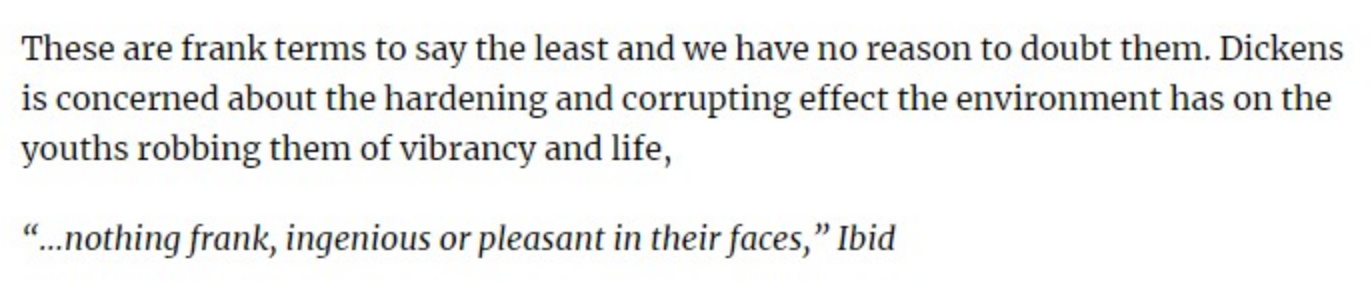
These are Frank terms to say the least and we have no reason to doubt them. Dickens is concerned about the hardening and corrupting effect the environment has on the youths robbing them of vibrancy and life,

"...nothing frank, ingenious or pleasant in their faces," Ibid

Letter he reflects that the ragged school had done some good and he leaves the reader with some hope for the boys,

"...something had been done already...had taught them to look forward in a hymn (they sang it) to another life, which would correct the miseries and woes of this," Ibid

The image of the 'vicious' boys singing a hymn is an attempt to restate a little dignity and humanity to their image constructed in the text and as a true account is moving when we consider what they looked forward to was death, an end to their struggle.



Depiction of Brook Street Ragged and Industrial School, 1846. (Illustrated London News)

In contrast to Dickens account in the 19th century, yet never the less as desperate as the description of poor 'slum' children by Sugata Mitra from 2012 residing to an educational tool in his piece, 'The Hole in the Wall Project and the Power of Self-Organized Learning.' The enthusiasm of the local street kids is striking as it highlights the shocking waste of potential everywhere there are,

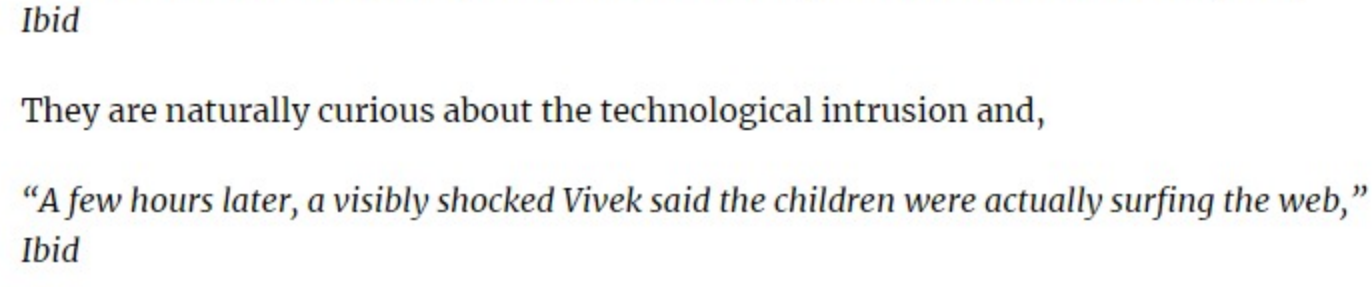
"Desperately poor people struggling to survive," Sugata Mitra, 'The Hole in the Wall Project and the Power of Self-Organized Learning' 2012 www.edutopia.org

Sugata observes that,

"Children come running out of the nearest slum and glued themselves to the computer," Ibid

They are naturally curious about the technological intrusion and,

"A few hours later, a visibly shocked Vivek said the children were actually surfing the web." Ibid



Hole in the wall, photo by Philippe Terbouchech, Jalpur, Rajasthan

Within six months Sugata found the children had caught themselves most of the functions the computer had to offer and had even created terms for otherwise alien images and software. In both cases environment and access are key problems, in both cases poverty has either hardened or imbued desperation into the young.

While many parts of the world are still mired in this kind of problem we have come far since the time of Dickens, haven't we?

**Scenes from British Education 2018**

(The account below is from a reliable source who being employed in the education industry would like to remain anonymous to our readers for obvious reasons)

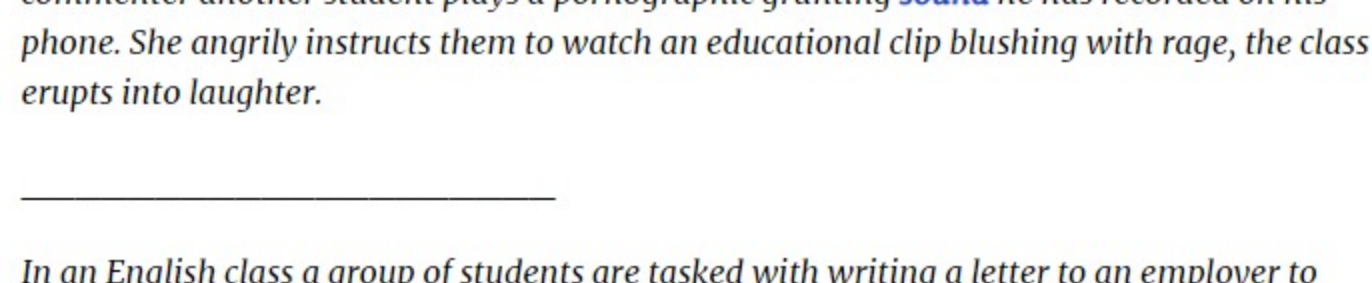
A round boy of 17 eyes forced into slits by the fullness of his cheeks blows a raspberry and makes a coarse gesture indicating the shaving of an appendage into a backside. The teacher is trying to explain methods of addition and subtraction in a functional skills class. The gesture is repeated each time the teacher turns her back to write on the white board, loud giggles and blasé of audience support the action. She begins to elaborate the "bus stop method" serious and professional in demeanor, across the room a young woman states, "I can't be fat 'gied", she struggles to top and swears at her device due to the length of her nails, she is one of five pupils who rarely look up at all during the lesson. A boy in low slung jeans who inexplicably has one hand inside his trousers gripping his crotch asks the teacher following her statement about taking away, "do you take it miss? She ignores him, turns around to the board, raspberry, "cracking arse miss" while she appropriately confronts this comment another student plays a pornographic granting sound he has recorded on his phone. She angrily instructs them to watch an educational clip blushing with rage, the class erupts into laughter.

In an English class a group of students are asked with writing a letter to an employer to enquire about a job. Instead the subtle request are looking at YouTube videos of horror films, a young man laughs at the notion of a small child being killed by a clown. On his worksheet there is a picture of a mouth giving oral sex to a disembodied genitalia "Will do this for job" is written underneath, spelled correctly, grammar needs work. At the back of the room a boy calls out an expletive at the top of his voice (his pencil nib broke) he pelts the pencil at the back of his friend's head and receives a blow to the leg which initiates a fight that the teacher breaks up.

A girl of eighteen at a pause in reading a text during GCSE English begins to mimic her own little brother, a child of seven with a speech impediment who also struggles with a stammer, "hes dumb bruv...da dad daada" The class laugh but some of the boys from a uniformed services class are a little shocked, the set they just finished was about the abuse of child, an award winning book set in Afghanistan.

**Are we demonising the working class?**

In his review of Owen Jones's famous book, 'The Demonization of the Working Class', Sean O'Hagan highlights the shock felt by the middle class that they and the upper echelons were not held in high regard by an increasingly hostile seething working class.



"The crimes committed by 'chavs' included being too loud, too flashy, too drunk, too vulgar and, most inexcusable of all, too disrespectful towards their "betters". Somewhere between the rise of New Labour and the start of the current financial recession, the middle classes seemed suddenly surprised and appalled to discover a new "Joni underclass" (Simon Heffer) 'In the place of the old deferential proletariat'" Sean O'Hagan 'Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class by Owen Jones - review' 2011

"The issue is no longer one of access and the problem can't be solved by sinking a computer into a wall on an estate or suburb,"

The strange thing is not this tension between cultures and economic rivals but that education it would seem is marred by this conflict also. For many, those mentioned above perhaps does not seem to be a sort after commodity like a phone or a computer. It is not the purpose of those examples to demonise those people but like Dickens the point of the inclusion of entirely unsympathetic and candid examples is simple; there is no liberal hand wringing or failure to recognise, or name the flaws wrought onto certain young people. What is the purpose of talking about personal responsibility, dignity, manners or ambition in the context of a yawning teenage life? Dickens asks the same question.

The students mentioned mar their own chances, they are 'lumpen' to evoke a Marxist term and are unpalatable in manners and presentation. Our culture is responsible for producing millions of them, it is negligent and schizophrenic rather than outright contemptful as in the time of Dickens. If that period (19th century) hardened and criminalised this 'surplus population' to use Scrooge's term, than our own time stultifies and distracts this surplus.

"they remain at a palatable distance mediated and edited into convenient tropes for consumption"

The issues Dickens highlighted have not been eradicated from UK educational facilities. The issue is no longer one of access and the problem can't be solved by sinking a computer into a wall on an estate or suburb. The issue is lack of purpose and apathy in general to education. This cemented in families and local communities. Perhaps people no longer believe a good education will guarantee them a job (it won't) and they have no interest in being bettered by people with much nicer lives.



Sell from 'I Daniel Blake' 2016 Director Ken Loach

Many people are ready to feel something like pity, empathy or charitable concern for wide eyed children huddled around a computer in a foreign country (Hole in the Wall) after all we will never meet them. They remain at a palatable distance mediated and edited into convenient tropes for consumption. Perhaps Ken Loach's 'I Daniel Blake' 2016 is a modern example of Dickens other strategy for grabbing public attention elaborating the circumstances that produce 'low browed, vicious, cunning, wicked' children. What would we say to a real Katie Morgan (pictured, played by Haley Squires) single mum so poor she skips her own meals, if her children turned out like those in the accounts above?

Social mobility and educational achievement among the poor is in decline, these issues will get worse. The account from India is about desperation and the energy which comes from that terrible state, clearly though we don't feel that this is a wonderful scene! Rather it shows the abject failure of a system to provide for its people. Here in Britain we don't have that level of difficulty but we do have, low base depression, grey apathy and a terrible lull that we urgently need to wake up from!

**Notes**

1 (in Marxist contexts) uninterested in revolutionary advancement: "the lumpen public is enveloped in a culture of dependency" Oxford dictionary

You Gov report here.

Sonia Blanford, 'Born to fail? No. But working class children do need help to succeed' March 2018 Guardian.com

Sean O'Hagan 'Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class by Owen Jones - review' 2011 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jun/19/chavs-demonization-working-class-review

A hole in the Wall here.

Header Image: The Heygate Estate in London's Elephant and Castle was built in 1974 and housed over 3000 people. Six years ago, the buildings and land were sold so that it could be used to build new properties for investors and private buyers.

**Tickle Up**  
Exceptional upward mobility in the US is a myth, international studies show. 08/09/2012 In "News"

50 Years of Social Progress. 28/12/2013 In "Society"

Make Better Music Pt.2: Revisited. 27/05/2016 In "Sound"

CLASS INCOME EDUCATION POVERTY SOCIAL MOBILITY

**About Michael Eden** - 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east. His artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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