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We Need to Talk about Class

Towards a Class-Based Approach in Contemporary Museum Theory and Practice

Serena Iervolino and Domenico Sergi

ABSTRACT: Class differences have historically received limited attention in museum theory and practice, and scholarly publications on issues of class and heritage are still scarce. COVID-19 has shone a particularly harsh light on class divisions. At the height of the pandemic, working-class laborers (such as supermarket cashiers, social care workers, truck and delivery drivers) were asked to shoulder high levels of health risks, exposing entrenched socioeconomic inequities. In this article, we build upon a small-scale research and collecting project, Inequalities, Class, and the Pandemic, carried out in 2021 by the London Museum (formerly known as the Museum of London) and King's College London, to discuss how museums can meaningfully engage with working-class lived experiences in our contemporary neo-liberal societies. We begin by analyzing whether and how museums have addressed working-class issues and (hi)stories. We then draw on the voices and experiences of our research participants to examine the ongoing structural inequalities experienced by working-class Londoners. Building on our empirical research, we argue for museums to play an active role in reclaiming the centrality of class in public culture, particularly addressing the contemporary lived experiences of working-class people.

KEYWORDS: contemporary collecting, diversity, equality, museums, pandemic, working class

The significance of "class" in contemporary Britain has perhaps best been popularized by the international bestseller *Watching the English* (Fox 2014). Drawing on ethnographic research, anthropologist Kate Fox defines class as a "quintessentially English character" played out through several performative elements from linguistic codes to humor. She half-jokingly suggests that "[a]ll English people, whether they admit it or not, are fitted with a sort of social Global Positioning Satellite computer that tells us as soon as he or she begins to speak" (Fox 2014: 73). These seemingly quaint cultural traits speak to a much larger politics of class that are arguably entangled with Britain's colonial past and present (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021). Despite sociologists concurring that class is one of the most important structuring axes around which British society is organized (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor 2020:11), recent decades have witnessed the growing popularization of the notion that class divisions no longer define Britain. Such a misconceived idea has been rightly challenged by British academic Richard Hoggart (1989: para. 7), who famously claimed that "[c]lass distinctions do not die; they merely learn new ways of expressing themselves." This common fallacy, and its associated mantra, "we are all middle-class now," increasingly put forward across the political spectrum, has motivated critics, including journalist Owen Jones (2020), to engage in research and writing that seeks to counter such misbelief (see also Hanley 2014; Robson 2016).

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Building on this work, we set out to foster reflection on why class analysis has been largely eluded in museum scholarship, even when concrete efforts to tell working-class histories have been made, particularly in social history museums, and questions of diversity and inequalities have gained center stage in both professional and scholarly circles. In 2020, a seismic event took place that shed further light on the structural inequalities and class differences which characterize contemporary neo-liberal societies: the COVID-19 pandemic. With museums in the UK and abroad scrambling to initiate *rapid response collecting* projects to document these unprecedented events (Atkinson 2020), the need to foster critical reflection around issues of class and social inequalities in the museum sector became glaring. This led us to collaboratively conceive and carry out the seed research and collecting project Inequality, Class and the Pandemic (hereafter ICP) (2021–2022), co-funded by the London Museum and King's College London. The immediate aim of ICP was relatively straightforward: to use oral history interviews to document—and preserve for posterity—the lived experiences of "essential" workers in low-paid, working-class jobs, such as supermarket workers, cleaners, social care workers, bartenders, teaching assistants, and food delivery couriers. These workers were making a critical contribution to the running of societies paralyzed by the pandemic and, in so doing, risked their lives for negligible earnings.

"Class" as a distinctive analytical concept has been used to refer to people who share similar relationships to the means of production (Marx and Engels [1888] 2022) or similar employment types and income levels (Goldthorpe 1980). Since the early eighties, more nuanced understandings of social class have been put forward to capture people's concentration of what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) famously named economic, cultural, and social capitals;[1] in other words, not only similar income levels and wealth but also common lifestyles, identities, and social networks coalesce to define one's social class (Savage et al. 2015). Yet, the profound disparities exposed by the pandemic made a focus on the economic dimensions of class all the more urgent, leading us to concentrate on employment in our inquiry. By reading class through the lenses of labor, however, we do not intend to refute the extent to which other forms of capital, be this social or cultural, inform people's social class.

The article begins by examining museums' historical engagements with class and their pitfalls, and by reflecting on the absence of class in more recent debates around diversity and equality. After briefly expanding on the research's aims and methodology, we draw on the project's oral history interviews to offer insights into contemporary working-class lived experiences, particularly in a global city such as London. In the concluding section, we reclaim the centrality of class in museum scholarship and practice. We argue that it is critical for museums to offer more contemporary and nuanced interpretations of twenty-first-century working-class lives, and engage more critically with questions of diversity, equality, and inclusion.

From Victorian Moral Reformers to the Neo-liberal Museum

In recent years critics have acknowledged that British museums have often failed to engage and serve working-class people (Chynoweth 2022; Fleming 2022; Iervolino and Sergi 2022a, 2022b). Nonetheless, there has been less recognition that the root-causes of this lack of engagement run deep. The birth of the nineteenth-century public museum, which was entangled with arguments around the civilizing and moralizing powers of the arts, represents a critical step. If the civilizing potential of the arts had been long emphasized by philosophers such as Aristotle and Kant, and Romantic poets including Wordsworth and Shelley, it was in nineteenth-century England that this power was regarded as an antidote to the growth of the urban working classes (Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Nineteenth-century champions of unrestricted access to public museums conceived these as instrumental for the betterment of the "poor." The arrogant attitudes of Victorian reformers towards the less affluent classes are evidenced by the parliamentary debates that led to the creation of public art galleries (ibid.). If the working classes were, at least nominally, allowed to enter the museum, this broadening of access was not guided by notions of inclusivity or "democratisation of culture" (Evrard 1997).

Tony Bennett famously discussed these contradictions in his influential book *The Birth of the Museum* (Bennett 1995). Bennett argues that the educational and civilizing agencies comprising the "exhibitionary complex," including museums, galleries, and their exhibitions, provided "new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of the working class" (Bennett 1995: 73–74). Significantly, they did so by

offering a context "in which the working- and middle-class publics could be brought together and the former—having been tutored into forms of behavior to suit them for the occasion—could be exposed to the improving influence of the latter" (ibid.). Arguably, the legacy of museums' condescending attitude towards working-class audiences has continued to shape practices in the sector around diversity, equality, and inclusion. Cultural policies and funding programs have especially prompted museums across the UK to attract broader and more diverse audiences (Alexander 2020), albeit sometimes for differing, and often primarily economic, rationales.

Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (1979–1990) and its measures in the area of culture, including cuts to grants-in-aid to arts organizations and emphasis on financial accountability, encouraged British museums to enter "a more neoliberal world" (Alexander 2020: 83). If these measures sought to broaden museum audiences, inevitably, they further marginalized underprivileged and economically disadvantaged groups. While retaining the Conservatives' emphases on notions of self-support, financial accountability, and business acumen, the subsequent New Labour government (1997–2007) urged museums to act as instruments of "social inclusion" (Newman and Mclean 2002). New Labour's cultural policies were considered by some critics as instrumental (e.g., Belfiore 2009), or as attempts to assimilate marginalized audiences into dominant understandings of heritage (Smith, Shackel and Campbell 2011: 4). This policy framework pushed museums to deliver need-based provisions traditionally offered by other third sector agencies (Silverman 2010). Still, even a program such as Renaissance in the Regions (2001–2008), which directed significant resources to regional English museums to improve their education provisions, failed to foster long-lasting audience access and diversification due to its short-termism, DCMS[2] priorities, and museums' reluctance to change (Selwood 2009).

Following the introduction of austerity policies by the Coalition and Conservative governments after 2010, funding cuts and pressures towards revenue generation have further pushed UK museums towards processes of marketisation (Alexander 2020, 2014)—a neo-liberal trend largely embraced by museums in the Global North. As discussed by Rina Kundu and Nadine Kalin (2015), this translated into an increased market-oriented approach and the adoption of income-generation strategies and marketing tools including segmentation, branding, and sponsorship. Arguably, increasing neo-liberal pressures have urged museums to attract larger and, importantly, *spending* audiences, which have further marginalized working-class visitors due to their limited spending power. But, how have museums and scholarship sought to specifically address socioeconomic inequalities and class differences? We discuss this question before turning our attention to our project.

Diversity, Equity, and the Question of Class in Museum Theory and Practice

Since the early 1990s, a significant and still growing body of scholarship has addressed how museums could represent, give voice to, and include minoritized communities (e.g., Golding and Modest 2013; Karp, Kreamer, and Lavine 1992; Sandell 2022, 2007). Museums striving to democratize their practice have been described in the literature as "inclusive" (Sandell 2002), "socially responsible" (Janes and Conaty 2005), and even "activist" (Janes and Sandell 2019). More recently, Chynoweth and coauthors (2020:1) have proposed the notion of the "useful museum." This body of scholarship has been of critical importance in advancing museums' social justice agenda. At the same time, as we maintain elsewhere (Iervolino and Sergi 2022b: 1), these initiatives have tended to approach this work through the lenses of diversity (initially in terms of race and ethnicity, and more recently of disability, sexuality, and gender), rather than equity.[3] Arguably, even amidst significant efforts to broaden, diversify, and include marginalized groups, social class has been overlooked in museum theory and practice. This is not to suggest that working-class (hi)stories have been absent in all museums or that working-class experiences have been disregarded by scholarship. Chynoweth's recent edited volume, *Museums and the Working Class* (2022), is a testament to a renewed interest in class in museum scholarship and practice.

From the 1970s onward, civic museums across the UK made significant efforts to collect the "everyday" and portray the histories of *all* members of society, as part of the development of the academic field of social history. The closure of mills, mines, and factories gave impetus to the creation of social and industrial

history museums (Black 2011). As argued by Kavanagh (1993: 62), during this period the histories of local working-class communities had become a "dominant topic" in UK museums, a trend which is still reflected today in most social, industrial and local history displays, which seek to tell working-class labor history. Also, specialized people's history or workers museums have been established, both nationally and internationally.[4]

Representations of traditional working-class jobs such as factory or mining work populate many such museums, even when they no longer reflect the contemporary labor market. McGrath (in conversation with Chynoweth 2022) points to the pitfalls of some museum programs that privilege problematic representations of miners in the North of England in the 1960s, with their sepia-toned photographic exhibitions that disengage with contemporary working-class realities through a focus on the past. Significantly, however, Sheila Watson (2007) shows how local communities themselves might articulate, in local history museums, collective identities located in an essentialized past and tied up with idealized working-class histories. This idea is echoed by Elizabeth Carnegie (2006), who emphasizes how working-class communities have often driven the development of nostalgic social history displays. Nick Merriman (2000) traces a connection between people's social positions and their images of the past, arguing that those less privileged are more likely to see it as a more peaceful time. Yet, as discussed by Laurajane Smith, Paul Shackel and Gary Campell (2011: 1), working-class people can also powerfully "avoid reactionary nostalgia and self-pity" and contribute to reflexive and assertive heritage projects. In other instances, museums and heritage sites may project narrow and stereotypical views of working-class lives by privileging past narratives of poverty and deprivation.[5] Otherwise, they put forward romanticized portrayals of working-class people living a simpler, happier, and more community-oriented life in the past.[6] This results in representations focusing on the very poorest in society—thus engaging in what has been referred to in British media and politics as "poverty porn" (Jones 2020, Patrick 2017).

Academic publications addressing socio-economic differences and working-class issues remain scarce, being primarily limited to work addressing curatorial and exhibition narratives (Carnegie 2006; Hill 2005) or issues of employment of working-class people in the UK cultural and museum sector (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2017; Evans 2020; Evans, Whiting, and MacKenzie-Davey 2020). Yet, the interpretation of working culture and labor history has attracted some attention (Oliver and Reeves 2003), pointing to the agency of working-class people in interpretating *their* heritage (Smith, Shackel, and Campbell 2011). If lately there is a growing interest in working-class issues, there is still a long road ahead. We believe that there are several reasons behind the limited attention to *contemporary* working-class stories and experiences. The primary reason, discussed in the introduction, is the misconceived notion, in society at large, that class no longer defines British society, leading museums to disengage with the topic. Worryingly, this idea was recently upheld by museum professionals during sectorial events organized by Museum as Muck, the UK's network of working-class museum people (McGrath and Taylor 2022: 417). Another important reason is that the majority of arts professionals, particularly those in leadership positions, come from middle-class backgrounds (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2020: 108) and tend to shy away from engaging with class differences. As noted by Michelle McGrath and Mark Taylor (2022), an associated complexity is the difficulty of defining class as an analytical and legal category, particularly when compared to the nine "protected characteristics" under the UK 2010 Equality Act.[7]

In the remainder of the article, after introducing our case study and its methodological framework, we analyze the narratives emerging from the oral history interviews to show how contemporary working-class experiences have significantly changed from the museum tradition we discuss above.

Case study: "Inequality, Class, and The Pandemic"

In April 2020, the London Museum launched its own "Collecting COVID" project within the framework of "Curating London," a contemporary collecting program which placed Londoners' lived experiences at the heart of the curatorial process (Sergi and Sparkes 2023). "Collecting COVID" aimed to tell future generations what it was like to live in London during the pandemic, documenting the experiences of a broad range of Londoners. Our collaborative research and collecting project, ICP, had a sharper aim: to research, document, and collect the lived experiences of working-class Londoners in particular. We wanted

to explore the "profound class dimensions" of this public health, social, and economic crisis (Jones 2020: xix) and consider their implications for museums. We used oral history interviews as our primary method of data generation. These interviews were recorded in the spring and summer of 2021 with a small sample of 15 Londoners in low-paid, working-class jobs. By focusing on the experiences of lower socio-economic groups, we sought to counter the class-blind approach of other COVID-related oral history projects.[8] Our research participants were diverse with regard to age, nationality, ethnicity, and residence within London. The majority of delivery couriers interviewed were from Black and Global Majority groups, with recent migrants from Brazil making up the largest group. Gender representation was slightly unbalanced by the numbers of interviews with food delivery couriers (over half of the sample), who tend more to be male (Wang, Wang, and Xu 2021: 5).

Structural Inequalities

In this section, we discuss working-class narratives that emerged in our study. The aim is to bring attention to changes in the experiences and structures of the working classes and convey the centrality of socio-economic disadvantage in twenty-first-century neo-liberal Britain, before reflecting on how museums might respond to these changes. In recent decades, working-class people in Britain have been increasingly depicted as languishing at the bottom of the social structure due to their own individual failings. Arguably, the Thatcher era created the cultural and systemic conditions for a devaluing of the working class and its progressive demonization in popular culture and in media and policy discourses as "lazy" or "work-shy" or even "benefit scroungers" (Jones 2020; McGlynn 2016; Savage et al. 2015). If this stereotypical narrative has cemented in the public imagination ever since (Garthwaite 2012), the "scrounger myth" does not align with our findings or those of previous research (see, for instance, Savage et al. 2015). As we show below, if anything, the testimonies of our research participants point to the significant role played by systemic factors, rather than individual responsibilities, in people's experiences of economic struggles during the pandemic.

Several of our interviewees shared the challenges they confronted when being made redundant or losing regular work, having to resort to hard-won savings, if any, borrowing money, or attempting to apply for Universal Credit or Job Seeker's Allowance. This was the experience of Angela, a supermarket worker, who stated:

> And then I got made redundant. I was struggling to find a job for about six months, so I was claiming Job Seeker's Allowance, because I didn't have any money or savings. I've been struggling … I've been borrowing money off people that when I did get paid, if I did have a job at the time, I'd have to pay back straight away, so I would be in the same situation again. I tried to claim Job Seekers' Allowance, which just has been awful … I wish there was a bit more help financially for all the people that have struggled but there just isn't anything. (Angela, supermarket worker)[9]

Crucially, most of our interviewees explained how they found themselves ineligible for government financial support, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (otherwise known as "furlough"). If the furlough scheme subsided "the wages of over 9 million workers" (Spencer et al. 2023: 81) and minimized the incidence of household financial distress, particularly for low-income workers (Görtz et al. 2023), not everybody qualified for it. Significantly, the livelihoods of working-class people in especially precarious self-employment and the gig economy, such as food delivery couriers, were not supported, as Asif noted:

> We had no choice but to work, we didn't have the privilege of being able to work from home, or being put on furlough, for example. You know, we still had to literally make the money ... Luckily, coming from a background of a people understanding struggle, it's obviously not so difficult, but at the same time it kind of eats you up. (Asif, delivery courier)

Consequently, due to structural inequalities, many of our interviewees, including Carlos, had no other option than to secure employment in the few job markets that thrived during the pandemic, particularly the food delivery industry:

> I got laid off from my previous job, and I had no choice but to jump on Deliveroo because it was the next easiest choice and I was in a desperate situation. (Carlos, delivery courier)

As we discuss below, those working in self-employment roles in the food delivery industry occupied a particularly precarious position.

A Risky Business

As argued by Karen Gregory (2021), platformed labor presents a set of risks ranging from physical risk and bodily harm to financial and epistemic risks—an issue emphasized by our research participants. If Francisca pointed to the health risk of food delivery, requiring contact with many customers, Asif emphasized the stigma associated with his job in mainstream and social media:

> We are doing deliveries all day and meeting like 50 different people with close contact, so we needed to know and learn as well how we can stay the safest for ourselves and for them as well. For this everyone needed some time to keep to the rules. (Francisca, delivery courier)

> During the pandemic a lot of people were scared, and I don't blame them. They really don't want to make any contact with you. Sometimes they really hide behind the door and tell me to drop the food on the floor. (Asif, delivery courier)

While the precarious and unsafe nature of platformed labor predates COVID-19 (Larson 2021; Li, Mirosa, and Bremer 2020), the pandemic only emphasized the striking gaps in health and safety provisions. Carlos, for example, discusses the safety and financial risks determined by the lack of adequate insurance policies for platformed laborers:

> [The food delivery companies] offer us insurance, but I don't know anyone who got insurance from them. A friend of mine had an accident and he's supposed to have insurance from Uber. I was talking to him the other day and he had to stay home 45 days because he broke his feet, and he didn't get any help from Uber, unfortunately … (Carlos, delivery courier)

The uneven distribution of COVID-related health risk across the job market (see OECD 2022) depicts a deeply unjust society whereby working-class people were most likely to die from COVID-19 (Office for National Statistics 2021a). This data is particularly telling when cross-referenced with the highest COVID-19 mortality rates among South Asian and Black African and Caribbean communities (Office for National Statistics 2021b). The deep health inequalities among working-class people, and particularly those from a Black and Global Majority background, can be ascribed to several factors, including material deprivation (Razieh et al. 2021) and overrepresentation among the category of "essential workers" (see Platt and Warwick 2020: 12–13). Our research shows how class and race are inextricably intertwined, as most of the riders we spoke to were Black and Global Majority migrants. Not only were they aware of the risky nature of their business, but they were also deeply conscious of the existence of a steep class structure.

Conflicting Class Interests

Many interviewees, and precarious food delivery couriers in particular, conveyed a sophisticated understanding of the central role that class plays in British society. Some shared with us the feeling of being treated with contempt by customers. The idea of a deeply unjust class structure was powerfully conveyed by Paulo, who expressed the paradox of being an "essential worker" and being treated as occupying the bottom of the social hierarchy:

> With the pandemic I think delivery started to become essential work, even if people don't see that most of the time. They treat us like animals. You are doing them a "favor," but they don't feel like … that we have no options sometimes. That we do this because we want to survive. (Paulo, delivery courier)

This experience was echoed by John, another delivery courier, who claimed:

> As a courier, you're treated as a lower individual, or someone from a lower society. That was the big eye-opener for me. And how some people assume they're better than someone who's a courier. They have no idea of the background. They have no idea of what else we do, who we are as a person. They just see us as: "You are a courier. You're nothing to me. I'm better than you." (John, delivery courier)

This is not to say that our interviewees shared only negative experiences. In fact, some felt valued, particularly at the start of the pandemic (Iervolino and Sergi 2022b).

By referring to customers' privilege (of using disposable income to order food from the safety of their homes) and dehumanizing attitude towards them, Asif, Paulo, and John demonstrate that they are aware of the existence of a "politics of classification" (Savage, Silva, and Warde 2010: 61). They exhibit a heightened sensitivity towards the stereotypical "views about how others would position them—at the bottom of the pile," something that Savage and coauthors (2015: 339) noted in their research too. More significantly for us, our interviewees seem to be aware of the conflicting class interests produced by their socio-economic positioning. Customers who, from the safety of their home, used their spending power to satisfy their food needs, were read by our interviewees in opposition to precarious, low-paid working-class laborers, who felt treated as less worthy by both customers and, arguably, politicians who failed to acknowledge them as "essential workers." Such conflicting class interests are not unique to the pandemic. For instance, historian Selina Todd (2014: 120) notes how, during WWII, the Conservative government had considered the needs of the middle class of vital importance and had demanded a greater sacrifice and effort from working-class people. What emerged as distinctive in our study, however, is a sense of disengagement from class as a desirable identity.

"Dis-identification" from Class

If our interviewees saw themselves as forming a group whose interests were opposed to those of the middle classes, they did not seem to display a strong "class consciousness." In fact, they did not explicitly use class terminology in the interviews, even if they clearly belong to an urban working-class and fell within the "precariat" or "emergent service" class as defined by Mike Savage and coauthors (2013).[10] We understand the absence of an overt working-class identification in relation to the growing demonization of working-class people, which might have prompted many to reject their working-class identities. The concept of "dis-identification" from class is useful in understanding their rejection. As explained by Mike Savage, Elizabeth Silva, and Alan Warde (2010: 62), following the work of Bourdieu, sociologists started using the concept in the 1990s to probe a growing paradox surrounding class identity. This paradox saw people being often reluctant to identify as members of particular social classes, despite the intensification of class-based inequalities. Drawing on ethnographic research, Skeggs (1997) argued that if class remained a structuring feature in society, working-class people appeared more invested in embracing less stigmatized identity markers.

By using the theory of "dis-identification," our intention is not to resurrect the patronizing idea of false consciousness in Marxist theory. In fact, research indicates that, across the class structure, people "are ambivalent about which class they belong to" and do not feel strong collective class identities (Savage et al. 2015: 366). Yet, the notion of "dis-identification" is helpful in explaining the lack of an *overt* class-based identification, which appeared to be in operation amongst our research participants. This may be due to the fact that, despite economically falling under a precarious urban working class, research participants did not feel a strong class-based identity and did not consider class as a *primary* identity marker. For instance, the food delivery couriers we spoke to appeared to tie their own identities more to their migrant backgrounds or to their specific jobs, thus reflecting a trend across the class structure whereby jobs become "a defining detail of who we are" (Morgan 2021). They spoke at length about a sense of community, mutual support, and solidarity amongst fellow delivery riders (Iervolino and Sergi 2022b).

Conclusion

What we have mapped in this article is an especially complex context, both sociological and museological, whereby it is not at all straightforward to overturn the marginalization of working-class people in museums. Our project ICP strove to make a small contribution in this direction by documenting the experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic and, in so doing, further current museological thinking concerning class and, more broadly, issues of equity and social justice in the sector. We believe that museums scholars and practitioners have a role to play in actively refuting the myth of a "classless Britain" and, in so doing, reclaiming the centrality of class and of socio-economic inequalities in museums and public culture more widely. As this article shows, contrary to the "we are all middle class" motto, which has become a common-place of liberal politics across the political spectrum, Britain is a deeply unequal and unjust society where class divisions and structural inequalities continue to play a significant role. However, we also recognize the risks of flattening working-class experiences to one of economic precarity and deprivation, and the representational perils arising from museums contributing to the "poverty porn" industry.

Crucially, museums can capitalize on their storytelling capacity (see Bedford 2001), to counter the predominant demonization and negative hegemonic representations of working-class people in politics and media. As our research project demonstrates, museum research and practice can harness personal testimonies and the human desire to have your experiences heard and validated. In turn, this work can lay the foundations to articulate more complex contemporary narratives of working-class experiences, overcoming outdated, romantic, and nostalgic representational work in this area. However, in presenting the lived experiences of working-class people, museums should move beyond the patronizing and condescending approach of the past and contribute to counteracting the growing reluctance to identify as members of the working class, which we noted in our research. As we have shown in this article, working-class identities have become increasingly fragmented, more complex, and more intersectional, particularly in a global city like London. Working-class people have lost significant support structures and are confronting growing structural inequalities. Such changes need to be adequately reflected in collecting, displaying, and programming, particularly in social and local history museums and institutions committed to fostering social justice. Museums interested in engaging with lived experiences as part of their curatorial practice would find the documentation of contemporary autobiographical testimonies a relatively simple step to take in this direction.

One of the outputs of our project was the acquisition of nine oral history interviews in the London Museum's permanent collection, which will ensure access to the lived experiences of working-class Londoners during the pandemic in the years to come. Further research and practice are needed to enrich this intangible working-class heritage with the acquisition of relevant material culture to increase the display potential of working-class stories. In the short term, our research has also instigated a process of institutional reflection that has led the London Museum to develop a class-focused glossary (alongside those already developed on disability, LGBTQ+, colonial, and post-colonial histories) to support curators in developing content for the new museum site, opening in 2026 in West Smithfield.[11] Alongside this, we have secured funding through the UK Arts and Humanities Council's Collaborative Doctoral Award to expand our research on working-class communities in London. Importantly, if class has to reclaim a central role in current museological thinking and practice, a pivotal step is for museums to develop a more sophisticated understanding of diversity, equality, and inclusion. We believe that museums committed to social justice, in Britain and elsewhere, can no longer approach inclusion work through a class-blind prism.

As we discussed above, since the late 1990s museums in the UK have played a proactive role in fighting "social exclusion" and sought to foster inclusivity by developing initiatives foregrounding ethnic identity, disability, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. However, by prioritizing diversity over equality, museums have supported a liberal agenda to the detriment of the most economically disadvantaged members of society (Malik 2023). Despite the critical contributions made, this body of work has failed to harness its outmost intersectional potential and explore how economic disadvantages coalesce with other factors to engender varying modes of oppression. We believe that museums have a particular responsibility to explore the intersections between class and race; of course, other identity makers such as

disability, sexuality, and gender, to cite a few, should be also considered in class analysis. At the same time, our research with essential workers shows that a focus on low-paid employment highlights the multiple levels of oppression to which Black and Global Majority groups are particularly subjected. A race-based approach to class analysis holds potential for building a more sophisticated perspective of how both race and class can be understood by museums. While decolonial approaches have made radical interventions in the sector by addressing issues of racial inequality (Giblin, Ramos, and Grout 2019), we believed that they have also missed a chance to bring race and class into dialogue with each other. Omar Khan and Faiza Shaheen (2017:4) offer an important operational framework in this respect, pointing to the need to actively dispel the false opposition reiterated by right-wing politicians and media between minoritized ethnic communities and the "white working classes," which has undermined the potential of building a coalition across all those struggling on low incomes.[12]

The difficult balancing act between representing intersectional differences within the working classes and pointing to the root causes of inequalities reproposes the ethical dilemma famously introduced by philosopher Nancy Fraser (1998: 2–6). As she argues, social justice work, including around class differences, should be approached through the lenses of both recognition (of difference) and redistribution (of resources). As Fraser notices, the choice between class politics and identity politics is a false antithesis, as social justice requires both redistribution and recognition. Neither is sufficient on its own. We are fully aware that the redistributive role that we are calling for in museums around questions of class, structural inequalities, and (lack of) privilege is complicated. It requires museums truly committed to social justice and activism to envisage a model of "radical" museology striving to oppose the neo-liberal framework in which they are increasingly enmeshed. We believe that such a project can be only realized incrementally, through progressively incorporating working-class issues and voices into museum programs and organizational and governance structures, and by collaborating with working-class people to carry out reflexive and projects of memory-making that reinterpret contemporary working-class identity. As two socially engaged museum scholars and practitioners, we hope that the seeds that we have scattered here will instigate further practice and thinking inspired by the values of solidarity and collective action at a local and global scale.

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NOTES

1. While cultural capital is the ability to appreciate and engage with cultural goods and credentials institutionalized through educational success, social capital refers to contacts and connections, which allow people to draw on their social networks.
2. The Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport is a UK ministerial department, which supports culture, arts, media, sport, tourism, and civil society across England.
3. If diversity work strives to reflect "all the ways that people are different and the same at individual and group levels" in museum programming and structure (American Alliance of Museums n.d.), equity work is a strategic commitment to ensure "the fair and just treatment of all diverse members of community" (ibid.) by removing existing barriers and addressing past exclusions.
4. Examples of such specialized museums include the People's History Museum in Manchester and the Workers Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark.
5. An example is the National Trust's Back to Backs in Birmingham, which presents carefully restored nineteenth-century working-class houses and emphasizes their poor and unhealthy conditions and their progressive improvement due to technological innovation.
6. See, for instance, the exhibition *After Industry: Communities in Northern England 1960s–1980s* at the Tate (February–October 2022), which strives to present social documentary practices of photographers and filmmakers who aimed to record the lives of working-class communities during a period of economic decline.
7. The protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.
8. For a critical engagement with oral history projects undertaken during the pandemic, see Caruso, Abigail, and Smucker (2020).
9. This and all subsequent interviews were conducted in London in spring 2021.
10. The "emergent service class" tends to live in cheaper locations within large cities, such as London, and is a relatively young class with a high proportion of ethnic minorities within it. They work in a variety of occupations, usually in the service sector, such as bar work, chefs, customer service occupations and call center work (Savage et al. 2013: 230–42). The "precariat" is the most deprived of the classes on all measures of capital and tends to be formed by the unemployed, van drivers, cleaners, carpenters, care workers, cashiers, postal workers, and shopkeepers (ibid.: 243).
11. There is a project page about the new museum on the London Museum website: https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/west-smithfield (accessed 2 August 2023).
12. This is particularly important in a context where, from the Brexit referendum campaign onward, successive Tory governments and right-wing commentators have increasingly weaponized the "white working classes" in opposition to race and ethnic minority groups (Shaheen and O'Hagan 2017).

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