

What happened to the Affluent Worker? Deindustrialisation and class in an East of England town

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Theme: Identities and Employee Relationships

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Abstract

In 1963, John Hare MP, then Minister of Labour in the Macmillan government, said ‘Luton is a microcosm of the society we [Conservatives] are trying to create’ (cited in Goldthorpe et al., 1969, p. 47). In 2023, this statement, while perhaps still true after a fashion, reads rather differently than it did in the 1960s. While today Luton has the dubious honour of being (twice) described as the worst place to live in England by *The Daily Mail* (Mail Online, 2004; Robertson, 2016), in the 1960s it was remarkable for the extent to which it seemed to prove correct the contention, which was widely current in popular consciousness and academic circles at the time, that the British working-class was undergoing a process of *embourgeoisement*: becoming assimilated into the middle class, both economically through rising living standards and socially in its values and outlook. Racialised narratives of class have been taken up by politicians typically using unfalsifiable ideas about the ‘left-behind, white working-class’ which have served to grant a veneer of legitimacy to increasingly reactionary Conservative electoral and governing platforms and triggered much handwringing amongst Labour Party “intellectuals” (Mattinson, 2020). The academic debate on class, by contrast, is split between two dominant positions. The first is the neo-Weberian position which informed the Affluent Worker study in Luton in the early 1960s and is perhaps best represented today by Guy Standing’s work *The Precariat*. The second is a “culturalist” position, associated with the Great British Class Survey and the ensuing discussion around Savage et al. (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*. This paper will reframe the issue of class by viewing it through the lens of world systems theory. It argues that deindustrialisation and class in Luton is best understood as a global phenomenon, wherein the changing nature of class in the global North, the UK and the East of England can only be adequately understood in terms of their interconnection with developments in Eastern Europe, East and Southeast Asia and Africa in particular. While class has traditionally been understood based on a worker’s position in the productive process or their tastes and consumptive patterns, we argue that, as the locus of global production moves decisively eastwards, Western class identities in the 21st century will increasingly come to be defined by processes of reproduction in conditions of advanced deindustrialisation rather than by production or consumption. It will conclude by setting out the contours of a future research

agenda which begins to explore established, new and emerging patterns of reproduction and production in Luton and its environs.