

A black and white aerial photograph of a densely packed residential area, likely a council estate or working-class housing development. The houses are arranged in a grid-like pattern, with many having dark roofs and light-colored walls. The houses are built on a hillside, with a road or path visible in the foreground. In the background, a large, open field or park is visible, and a few more houses are scattered on the distant hilltop.

BEN JONES

THE WORKING CLASS IN MID TWENTIETH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Community, identity and social memory

The working class in
mid-twentieth-century England



Manchester University Press

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Published by Manchester University Press
Altrincham Street, Manchester M1 7JA, UK
www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 8473 7 hardback

First published 2012

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Typeset in 10.5/12.5 Minion Pro
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

For Mum and Dad

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Acknowledgements

This book began life as a DPhil thesis undertaken at the University of Sussex. My supervisors, Claire Langhamer and Ian Gazeley, were exemplary. I have benefited enormously from their advice, support and friendship. Alun Howkins and Carol Dyhouse have also been hugely encouraging and supportive. My life would have been much the poorer without the spectacular company and beautiful friendship of Lucy Robinson and Eugene Michail. Indeed Sussex provided an atmosphere of comradeship and collegiality which has left me indebted to a large number of people. So my warmest thanks go to: Tom Akehurst, Ben Annis, Hester Barron, David Boyne, Dimitris Dalakoglou, Louise Davies, Andy Durr, David Foy, Nik Funke, Rafe Hallett, Ben Highmore, Roger Johnson, Chris Kempshall, Alex Pestell, Margaret Reynolds, Kevin Reynolds, Lorraine Sitzia, Nicola Verdon, Chris Warne, Clive Webb and Elke Weesjes.

Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor have taken an interest in this project from its inception and have shaped it in important ways. Andy Wood has the knack of doing the right things at the worst times and has been a rock. Other friends have lived with this project for as long as I have. Thanks to: Toby Harrison, Timothy Philip Mead, Timothy Walker Evans, Matthew James Crouch, Edward Paxton, David Webb, Nathan Thomas, Shad Khan, Andy Davies and Selina Todd.

Mike Savage was far more helpful than anyone could expect an external examiner to be. Not only did he pass my thesis, he encouraged me to apply for a post-doc at the Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change (CRESC) in Manchester. While he had taken up a new post by the time I arrived, I am indebted to him for his help and ongoing support. Andy Miles took me under his wing at CRESC and has been a good and wise mentor. Thanks also to Stacey Vigers and Susan Hogan at CRESC.

I am indebted to the ESRC who provided a postgraduate studentship (PTA-030-2004-01091) and post-doctoral fellowship (PTA-026-27-2614) which enabled me to start and finish this research. Similarly the Scouloudi foundation helped enormously with a fellowship in 2008. Thanks to the library

staff and archivists at the universities of Sussex, Brighton and Manchester, Brighton Local Studies Centre, the Mass Observation Archive and East Sussex Records Office. Thanks to Malcolm Keeping for permission to use his photographs.

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My family have supported me throughout my time as a perpetual student and it would be nice to think that one day I might be able to repay them by getting a job. Love and thanks to my Dad, Chris and my Mum, Clare. My twin sister, Amelia, and my older brother, Dan, showed the appropriate levels of interest and provided me with material and emotional support. Thanks also to Ben Crispin and Anna 'Wilks' Wilkinson and to little Sid for being such a boon. My grandparents Pauline Dubock and Charles Jones were born into the kinds of working-class communities which this book deals with. They have both influenced me in ways that it is difficult to articulate adequately. I must thank Becca Searle for her help with this book, her unswerving love and support and for so much more.

Finally I would like to thank those people who talked to me and have so enriched this book with their life histories. I would also like to thank all my friends from the East Brighton Bygones History Society, especially Vernon Brand, Norman Foord, Betty Gillett, the late Ken Powell, Marilyn Powell, Sid Jones and David Rowland. Fred Netley knows more about this subject than anybody. My analysis owes a great deal to the conversations I have had with him over the years. I hope that what I have written here does them and him justice.

Abbreviations

BSAS	British Social Attitudes Survey
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office
FWWCP	Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers
MOA	Mass Observation Archive
NDC	New Deal for Communities

Chapter 1

Introduction

On a damp Saturday morning in early December 1938 two cars left Blackheath, south-east London, bound for the resort of Brighton on the Sussex coast. The occupants (three men and three women) were members of the recently established social research organisation Mass Observation, then engaged in a series of surveys of provincial towns.¹ Over the weekend, besides interviewing local dignitaries, logging statistical data from the town's library and recording the frequency with which alcoholic drinks were ordered in local bars, the six 'Mass observers' carried out a door-to-door survey. Those who opened their doors on the Saturday or Sunday afternoon were asked five questions: Do you like Brighton? What do you like best about Brighton? What don't you like about Brighton? Do you think the Archbishop of Canterbury is good at his job? What do you think of Major Tryon (one of the town's two Conservative MPs)?² As they recorded answers, observers guessed the age and social class of those they talked to. In doing so they established an ad hoc social geography of the town, classifying the inhabitants of each street. They made their way through Upper North Street ('middle class'), north along Portland Street and Spring Gardens (working class) and east to Bread Street (working class), where the following note was added: 'Basement houses – bad condition – slum'. In all, answers from 280 addresses were obtained, largely in working class streets in the North Laine and those between Albion Hill and Edward Street.

They found people suspicious, observer Kathleen Box noting they had 'never had so many refusals in one place before'.³ And while over half of those questioned said that they didn't dislike anything about the town, among those that had dislikes, a significant majority had concerns relating to rent levels, rehousing and slum clearance.⁴ At Portland Street there were complaints about high rents for old houses and praise for slum clearance. Other views were expressed in Bread Street. At no. 35 a man complained that the new estates were too far from town. At no. 44 a woman complained that streets recently demolished had not been redeveloped. At no. 29 a man and his wife were found 'very obviously distressed about moving'. The man, who

ran a small business in the centre of town, said: 'I fail to see why they should demolish these sorts of places . . . to build a car park.'⁵ The vociferousness of working class complainants was particularly marked, as Box recorded:

Working class people who don't like being turned out of their houses to move into ones further out of town, and who object to high rents [are] very apt to make very long speeches about this. . . . Noticed a much bigger difference between working and middle class answers to question 3 here than in other places. [A] special working class complaint seems to be that 'they want to push the poor people out of Brighton' that there are no factories and trade [suffers] by so many people being moved out of the centre of Brighton . . . On account of these complaints noticed much more class conscious resentment among working class people, towards the way the town is governed and upper classes in general.⁶

Mass Observation is full of such idiosyncratic findings. The idea of Brighton as a hot-bed of radical class-consciousness in inter-war Britain is certainly an unconventional one. Arguably it is one which hinges on comparisons with the other towns the observers had recently visited: Aldershot, Canterbury, Ipswich and Windsor – places which were hardly renowned as 'little Moscovs'.⁷ But there is also a more serious point to this data, which is to begin to shift academic attention away from the traditional spheres of working class formation – which, to put it crudely, are the areas of heavy industry and manufacturing, London and 'the North' – to spaces and places which, like back-street Brighton, are perhaps less obvious.

That the dominant images of working class England in the middle years of the twentieth century are 'northern' or metropolitan is thanks in no small degree to a flowering of community and cultural studies for which the research of Mass Observation (1937–c.1955) provided important antecedents. The period 1956–c.1970 witnessed a ferment of intellectual activity in which new conceptualisations of 'culture' both legitimised the study of aspects of working class life beyond the narrow confines of labour history and highlighted the analysis of working class culture as a political priority.⁸ A multitude of studies explored the effects of rising affluence, suburbanisation and slum clearance, welfare and educational policies on working class lifestyles, identities and political attitudes. Two publications from 1957 – a work of popular sociology and a *mélange* of literary criticism and autobiography – demonstrate some of the anxieties which these changes generated. The former, Michael Young and Peter Willmott's *Family and Kinship in East London*, argued that suburbanisation was destroying the close bonds of kinship which tied working class communities together.⁹ The latter, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, while largely concerned with the deleterious effect which the 'newer mass art[s]' of advertising, cheap fiction and rock and roll music were having on working class culture, also spoke to this trend:

We all know of working-class people's difficulties in settling into the new council-house estates. Most react instinctively against the consciously planned group activities; they are used to group life, but one which has started from the home and worked outwards in response to the common needs and amusements of a densely packed neighbourhood. In these brick and concrete wastes they feel too exposed and cold at first, they suffer from agoraphobia; they do not feel 'it's homely' or 'neighbourly', feel 'too far from everything', from their relatives and from the shops.¹⁰

Amongst the most influential work was that undertaken by (formerly) working class intellectuals such as Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Dennis Marsden and Brian Jackson operating (initially at least) at the margins of academia and employing interdisciplinary methods and approaches which rendered them unpopular among more orthodox sociologists and English dons.¹¹ Especially problematic for some was the degree to which these writers drew upon their own experiences of class and mobility in order to critique aspects of contemporary society and established modes of criticism. This charge was particularly pertinent for Hoggart, whose experiences growing up in the Hunslet district in Leeds between the wars framed his richly textured landscape of working class life.¹² It is this partly autobiographical element which has been most widely critiqued. For Paul Jones, Hoggart was culpable of a 'defensive populist nostalgia', while in the introduction to the American edition of *The Uses of Literacy* even the evidently sympathetic Andrew Goodwin argued that it is a 'notoriously nostalgic' text.¹³ For Chris Waters, *The Uses of Literacy* 'is certainly the best known of the many laments for the traditional working-class community that appeared after the war, offering a nostalgic affirmation of the values and strengths of a way of life that was in rapid decline'.¹⁴ Among historians there remains a deeply held suspicion of retrospectively constructed accounts, which, as James Hinton remarks, 'may do as much to obscure as to reveal the processes shaping an individual life. "Remembering" how we became *who we are now* involves a process of narrative construction in which we forget earlier stories about *who we were then*.'¹⁵ From this perspective, 'nostalgia', with its suggestion of the subjective, sentimental and inauthentic is commonly regarded as, if not the antithesis, then perhaps the antonym of history, with its attendant associations of objectivity, detachment and method.¹⁶ Whether *The Uses of Literacy* is nostalgic or not is a moot point.¹⁷ The extent, causes and possible uses of nostalgia will be assessed later in this book. Here I want to argue that a consideration of Hoggart's critics allows us to open up an important set of questions for discussion. Namely, what constitutes experience? What is the relationship between experience, memory and identity? It is to these questions that I now turn.

Experiences, memories and social identities

The experience of class relations, an understanding of both bourgeois and working class cultures and a sense of what social mobility feels like structures Hoggart's text. On an upward trajectory out of the working class, Hoggart helped to define and give voice to what was to become a ubiquitous figure in post-war British culture: the grammar school boy. The picture Hoggart paints is of an anxious self, one desperately trying to 'pass' in the senses both of passing exams and, in doing so, of attempting to 'pass' into the middle class. The result is an often pained narrative, one which speaks of class dispositions as deeply felt and difficult to shake off. It is, arguably, this element of the work, as much as those remembered scenes of childhood, neighbourhood and home, which accounts for the work's longevity as a piece of social history as much as a work of cultural criticism. Indeed, for all Hoggart's attempts to play down the 'political' grievances of the working class, and for all his attempts to bridge the divide between two ways of life, it is the story of this uneasy self which continues to resonate most powerfully. If it makes for awkward reading, this is because, as Andy Medhurst points out, 'that very awkwardness both mirrors the awkwardness of Hoggart's class location and testifies to the newness of what he was trying to do'.¹⁸ For what Hoggart was attempting to do was to reconceptualise culture as 'the practices of making sense' of meanings as part of 'lived experience' and analysis as 'the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life'.¹⁹ A tactical use of experience was thus central to Hoggart's (and Raymond Williams's) attempt both to legitimate the study of working class culture and to illuminate social change.²⁰

'Experience' is a concept which took a bit of a theoretical hammering during the so-called 'linguistic' or 'cultural' turn in social history.²¹ The key intervention came with the publication of Joan Scott's article 'The evidence of experience' in 1991. In an excoriating polemic, Scott deconstructed the concept as it had been employed in the writings of R. G. Collingwood, Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson. The thrust of Scott's critique was focused upon 'the evidence of experience . . . that takes meaning as transparent [and] reproduces rather than contests given ideological systems'.²² So, for example, Raymond Williams's discussion of 'experience' in *Keywords* 'operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, and homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals'.²³ This, in Scott's terms, simply will not do:

Making visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their inner workings or logics; we know that

difference exists, but we don't understand it as relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. *It is not individuals who have experiences but subjects who are constituted through experience.*²⁴

Yet this conceptualisation of experience, as well as Scott's preferred methodology of 'textualizing' social relations arguably narrows the horizons of historical practice and is in danger of privileging the textual and the linguistic over the social and the experiential.²⁵ As Eley and Nield argued in their assessment of Scott's intervention, 'it was . . . an act of closure, especially against forms of historical work that may lie beyond the approved discursive terms of focus'.²⁶ Particularly problematic was her reduction of experience to a function of discourse, leaving no room for counter-hegemonic discourses which might be made possible, as Thomas Holt has argued, by 'an experience semi-autonomous from and/or contradictory to dominant discursive constructions'.²⁷

There are parallels here with de Certeau's critique of Foucault's methodology, whereby he noted that Foucault's privileging of the development of particular technologies of rule left unasked the question of 'how we should consider other, equally infinitesimal, procedures, which have not been "privileged" by history but are nevertheless active in innumerable ways'.²⁸ As de Certeau insists, it is impossible to reduce the functioning of a society to a dominant type of procedures; rather, 'society is composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions *and* of innumerable other practices, always there but not organizing discourses and preserving the beginnings or remains of different (institutional, scientific) hypotheses for that society or for others'.²⁹ Moreover, Scott's approach not only 'leaves open the question of how subjects mediate, challenge, resist or transform discourses' but also 'obscures the ways in which discourse and experience are intertwined'.³⁰ Indeed, just as she is about to deliver the *coup de grâce*, Scott relents, recognising that experience is 'so much a part of everyday language, so imbricated in our narratives that it seems futile to argue for its expulsion'.³¹ Evidence perhaps that, just when it seems down and out, 'experience walks in without knocking at the door'.³²

While Scott seems to have chosen to pursue intellectual/political history since (nearly) abandoning experience, the wealth of work over the past twenty years in memory studies, on 'the body' and on subjectivities suggests, as Kathleen Canning has archly noted, that 'experience' has enjoyed a fruitful 'afterlife'.³³ In what follows I explore some of the implications of this work for understanding the relationship between individual and collective identities. I begin, however, by investigating the possibilities raised by considering 'experience' dialectically. In German there are two words for experience:

Erlebnis and *Erfahrung*. As Martin Jay in his magisterial survey of the concept of experience in western thought explains, *Erlebnis* is usually translated as 'lived experience':

Normally located in the 'everyday world' (the *Lebenswelt*) of commonplace, untheorized practices, it can also suggest an intense and vital rupture in the fabric of quotidian [daily, customary, everyday] routine. Although *Leben* can suggest the entirety of a life, *Erlebnis* generally connotes a more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience than *Erfahrung*. The latter is sometimes associated with outer, sense impressions or with cognitive judgments about them . . . but it also came to mean a more temporally elongated notion of experience based on a learning process, an integration of discrete moments of experience into a narrative whole or an adventure. This latter view, which is sometimes called the dialectical notion of experience, connotes a progressive if not always smooth, movement over time, which is implied by the *Fahrt* (journey) embedded in *Erfahrung* and the linkage with the German word for danger (*Gefahr*). As such, it activates a link between memory and experience, which subtends the belief that cumulative experience can produce a kind of wisdom that comes only at the end of the day. Although by no means always the case, *Erlebnis* often suggests individual ineffability [inexpressibility], whereas *Erfahrung* can have a more public, collective character.³⁴

Among the most productive thinkers of the relationship between the individual 'lived' experience of modern life and experience as storied, reflected upon and remembered was the European writer Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, a central problem of the modern world was what he perceived of as a glut of *Erlebnis* which struggled to find comprehensible expression following the ruptures caused by rapid urbanisation and mass-mechanised warfare.³⁵ In attempting to transform *Erlebnis* into a communicable form which might allow for reflection and critique (*Erfahrung*), Benjamin turned to the work of the French poet Baudelaire and his juxtaposition of the language of modern life with the forms left by the older tradition of lyric poetry.³⁶ Yet Benjamin was also alive to the potential of finding *Erfahrung* in the newer technologies of photography and film and, in particular, to the possibilities for a 'poetics' of everyday experience through the use of montage.³⁷ For his practice, this meant attending to the 'dialectical image': 'a constellation (a montage) of elements, that in combination, produce a "spark" that allows for recognition, for legibility, for communication and critique'.³⁸ This was, arguably, what Benjamin was aiming at in his great unfinished work *The Arcades Project*.³⁹ Benjamin's work offers a particularly rich means of conceptualising the 'experience' of modernity in terms of thinking about the materiality of the past in the present, and in seeking to understand the relationship between the pell-mell of lived, individual experiences and remembered or collectively held narratives which help to make sense of experience. Importantly, though, his work highlights

the extent to which we need to consider the degree to which experience 'has distinct valences in different temporal and geographic locales'.⁴⁰ Thus it would be foolish to attempt to map wholesale Benjamin's conception of the (largely) French and German experiences of urban modernity c.1870–1940 onto a country like Britain, in which processes of industrialisation and urbanisation were considerably more elongated and manifestations of class politics arguably less violent.⁴¹ Given this, it would be useful to consider work on social identities, subjectivities and social memory which deals more directly with Britain in the middle years of the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most important critique of Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* to have since emerged is Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986). In this work, Steedman partially reconstructs the stories of her own and her mother's experiences growing up in Burnley in the 1920s and London in the 1950s. It is explicitly written against narratives like Hoggart's, Jeremy Seabrook's and others' which, Steedman argues, refuse to recognise psychologically complex subjectivities or the politics of envy, fantasy and desire for things.⁴² This book has been particularly important in disrupting monolithic narratives of collectively held cultures and values and in emphasising the complex, contingent and fragmentary processes of subject formation. Steedman and other feminist historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Alexander, Davidoff, Rose and Clark, have been at the forefront of what Koditschek has termed 'the gendering of the British working class'.⁴³ Other historians working on the mid-twentieth-century period have shown how gender and generation intersected with class to mediate the experience of work, leisure, neighbourhood, family and home. Particularly important have been Roberts's studies of Barrow-in-Furness, Lancaster and Preston;⁴⁴ Davies's and Langhamer's work on gender and leisure in Manchester and Salford;⁴⁵ Todd's research on young women's experiences of work and leisure;⁴⁶ Giles's on gender, modernity and identity;⁴⁷ and White's meticulous dissection of a 'lumpen' community in London between the wars.⁴⁸ If these studies have been successful in decentring the skilled male manual worker as the singular object of study, so too have others which have, arguably, 'racialised' and 'globalised' the study of the British working class. The work of Stuart Hall, Hoggart's successor as director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), has been particularly significant in this context.⁴⁹ Researchers at CCCS drew on versions of post-structuralism, the work of Gramsci and that of British Marxists such as Williams and Thompson to theorise race, class and gender in post-war British society. Important interventions emerging out of this tradition in relation to the cultural and political legacies of empire have been made by the group of mainly south Asian scholars associated with 'subaltern studies' and the cultural theorist Paul Gilroy.⁵⁰

Historical work by the likes of C. Hall, Tabili and Webster explored the mutually constitutive relationship between metropole and colony and historicised the complex intersections of 'race', class and gender in shaping mid-twentieth-century subjectivities.⁵¹ What these studies point to is the intersectionality of social identities and the degree to which identifications are always 'in process'. They are, moreover, always relational, as S. Hall notes: 'identities can function as points of identification only because of their capacity to exclude, to leave out, to render "outside", abject'.⁵² The formation of identities depends upon what Jenkins terms 'the internal and the external moments of the dialectic of identification: how we identify ourselves, how others identify us, and the ongoing interplay of these in processes of social identification'.⁵³ Thus, social collectivities are constituted both from 'within', via a process of internal group identification – the recognition of similarities and shared interests, and from 'without', both by being categorised by other groups, institutions or genres of power/knowledge and through the categorisation of others.⁵⁴ Conceptualising categorisation and identification in this way allows us to understand the centrality of power to processes of identification and to the potential for politics of agency and resistance in their formation. Lurking beneath this talk of social identities, of course, is an older understanding of class as 'a social and cultural formation' which can be defined 'only in terms of relationships with other classes'.⁵⁵ Thus, while focusing upon working class experiences and social identities, this study is also concerned with class relationships and the degree to which social groups categorise others and are categorised by the state and other social formations.

Like identities, memories are also always simultaneously social as well as individual. Memory is social in the sense that people draw upon particular repertoires, forms and devices in order to communicate meanings that are culturally shared. As the research of Allesandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini has shown, analysing oral reminiscences for their silences or for their uchronic 'might have beens' can tell us much about the relationship between individual subjects and ideological formations.⁵⁶ This and similar research on Britain and Australia has utilised the concept of 'popular memory' to explore how national myths, political ideologies and dominant cultural representations of classed and gendered identities shaped what could and could not be comfortably remembered and 'publically' narrated.⁵⁷ 'Popular memory' has been used by some, such as Raphael Samuel, to refer to pretty much all forms of unofficial knowledge about the past, from stories, myths, ballads and folklore to novels, newspapers, films and television programmes.⁵⁸ For others, such as the Popular Memory Group, the term also implies the struggles within the public field between the 'dominant memories' of states and powerful institutions and the oppositional memories of subaltern groups.⁵⁹ It is this latter interpretation, indicative of struggles between dominant and subaltern

ideologies and experiences, which will be adopted in this book. Further, when discussing the collective memories of particular classes or subaltern groups I will use the term 'social memory'. The notion of social memory is drawn from Halbwachs, who argued that it is only through the membership of social groups that individuals are able to acquire, localise and recall their memories.⁶⁰ As Connerton explains: 'Groups provide individuals with frameworks within which their memories are localised [by a kind of mapping]. We situate what we recollect within the mental spaces provided by the group. But these mental spaces . . . always receive support from and refer back to the material spaces that particular social groups occupy . . . we conserve our recollections by referring them to the material milieu that surrounds us.'⁶¹

To be clear, I am not arguing for some kind of social determinism, nor that individual subjects cannot resist, rework or reject dominant memories of nation or class which do not accord with their experiences.⁶² Rather, in thinking about the dialectics of experience-memory and subjective-collective, we might gain a better understanding of the complex forces which shape the memories of groups and individuals. I want to argue that the kind of social memory evident in Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* might be fruitfully conceptualised as a critique; in this instance a critique of dominant conceptualisations of what counts as 'culture' and what is deemed 'worthy' of analysis, albeit one which draws in part on the dominant Leavisite discourse of literary studies.⁶³ The political impact of Hoggart's intervention in the field of popular memory ought not to be underestimated: he, and many others after, prised open spaces for the discussion of subaltern experiences and the construction of working class identities. Story-telling was and is fundamental to the forging of these collective identities and shared politics. As Simon Hoggart noted in the foreword to the 2009 edition of his father's book: 'We as children have lost count of the number of people – working-class pensioners, middle class folk, innumerable grammar school boys, media people and even MPs and ministers, who have come up to say that it told their own story and illuminated their lives.'⁶⁴ Yet such stories cannot be shared by everyone: if they do not speak of people's own remembered experiences, other narratives will be needed. Writing in the 1980s, Steedman argued that Hoggart's description of the 'plight of the scholarship boy' made 'nostalgic reading now', and that while generations of men had made heroic narratives of their working class pasts and subsequent escapes, she, 'a grammar school girl of the 1960s[,] was sent to university with a reasonably full equipment of culture and a relative degree of intellectual self-awareness'.⁶⁵ While Hoggart and Steedman's accounts are divided by the differential experiences of gender and generation and differentiated by methodological techniques and theoretical concerns, they share certain similarities. Firstly, both, in their different ways, seek to draw out the specificities of 'ordinary' working-class

lives. Secondly, both their stories are set in the hegemonic sites of working class formation in England: London and the North. It is to the dominance of these regions in the cultural imagery of mid-twentieth-century working class that I now turn.

Dominant cultural representations of the English working classes

If the preceding paragraphs represent an attempt to use Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* as a lens through which the interlocking themes of class, experience and memory might be brought into focus, what follows is an attempt to refocus these themes with reference to both wider cultural representations of working class life from the middle years of the twentieth century and the existing historiography. What this entails is relocating the study of working class life away from its traditional regional contexts: the north of England and the East End of London. Hoggart's is one of a number of iconic texts and works of cultural production which cast a long discursive shadow over the study of the English working class as (apart from the metropolitan exception outlined below) a near-ubiquitously northern phenomenon.⁶⁶ This seems particularly true for the 1930s, where middle class writers, documentary makers and mass observers turned their attentions to the 'urban cannibals' of Wigan, Bolton and Blackpool.⁶⁷ By the 1950s, northern working class life was the subject for fictions and dramas produced by 'working class writers'; many of the 'angry young men' set their works in versions of the towns in which they had grown up.⁶⁸ The post-war period also saw the publication of iconic works of autobiography by Robert Roberts (Salford), Helen Forrester (Liverpool) and William Woodruff (Blackburn), which again seemed to fix remembered working class communities in both time and space.⁶⁹

When the focus *does* shift southwards, besides the attention given to Birmingham – courtesy of the autobiographies of Kathleen Dayus and the work of oral historian Carl Chinn – and Rogaly and Taylor's exceptional recent work on Norwich council estates, it is representations of London's East End which are dominant.⁷⁰ Here the period 1870–c.1900 stands out in terms of the voluminous reportage produced on *The People of the Abyss*.⁷¹ During this period the East End was represented as a 'Darkest England'; its population 'Other': poor, semi-criminal, potentially dangerous; its culture squalid, mysterious, pre-modern even.⁷² Yet, by the late 1930s one could find Cambridge drop-outs Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, among others down Lambeth way, doing the Lambeth Walk.⁷³ By the mid-twentieth century the working class people of East London (the Cockneys) were more likely to be represented as cheerful, pleasure loving, even heroic. As Gareth Stedman Jones notes: