The empirical research on which this paper is partly based was funded by a grant from the ESRC. Therese O’Toole and Su Jones were my co-researchers on that project. Indeed, they conducted most of the focus groups and interviews.
Historically, at least, class has been one of the key analytical concepts in social science generally, and Sociology particularly. Not surprisingly, it has also been one of the most contested (for good reviews see Crompton, 1998, and Savage, 2000). Here, I briefly discuss the problems of contemporary class analysis, paying particular attention to the ‘death of class argument’, before suggesting that class should be seen as a ‘structured lived experience’. This approach utilises the work of Bourdieu to outline a fuller understanding of how class operates to affect outcomes such as political participation. The paper concludes by presenting some results from my work on young people and politics with Therese O’Toole and Su Jones to illustrate the utility of this conceptual approach.

**i) The Problems of Contemporary Class Analysis**

As Savage (2000, p.3) argues: ‘The sociological debate on class and stratification has, since at least the Second World War, been organised around arguments between Marxist and Weberian approaches’. In fact, most of these debates have revolved around questions concerning the relative merits of class schema developed from Marxist and Weberian approaches. However, in the UK there is little doubt how this particular debate stands, it is John Goldthorpe’s Weberian categorisation of class, which focuses on employment relations, not on ownership (as would a Marxist), that has informed most empirical work.¹ This dominance is likely to continue, and indeed grow, because the new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), which was produced by a team from Essex University and is based on the ‘Goldthorpe schema’,² will become the schema used by most empirical sociologists and the UK Government for the foreseeable future.

¹ Goldthorpe distinguishes between three basic class positions: employers, self-employed workers and employees, although these groups are then subdivided, to produce x categories. Cite Li on comparing schemas.

² The aim was to develop a more theoretically grounded and empirically useful classification. The new classification identifies 27,000 occupations that are reduced to 353 occupational groups, which are further
Crompton and Scott (2002, p.4) contend, in common with many others (see, for example, Skeggs, 2000, p.3; Devine and Savage (2002, p. 185), that there has too much emphasis on judging the relative merits of various class schema. As a result they argue (2002, p.4): ‘debates have become increasingly focused on methodological questions, rather than on substantive issues of class inequality and class action.’ I have considerable sympathy with this argument, but it would be wrong not to acknowledge that Weberian-based empirical work on class has produced a great deal of useful information. As Skeggs puts it: ‘the descriptive school of social class is very important for showing how hierarchies do exist and for monitoring social changes’ (2000, p. 4). The problem is that such research usually only takes us so far.

Savage makes the argument succinctly (2000, p. 20): ‘the conceptual cupboard of classical class theory looks dusty. (…) What both Marxist and Weberian perspectives on class lack is any clear theoretical explanation of why and how class matters’. In fact, we need to make two points here. First, it is individuals who act, so it is crucial how individual’s understand and experience class and, as Skeggs (2000, p.3) emphasises: ‘a central weakness in any classification (is that it) cannot explore the meanings people give to objective positioning’. Second, as Crompton and Savage point out (2002, p.5), the class literature focuses on the outcomes of processes, yet, if we are to attempt to explain combined for most purposes to produce 8 social-class categories (see Ref). Like the Goldthorpe schema, it aims to differentiate categories according to the labour market position and the work situation of a typical employee in a given occupational category. The assessment of a person’s labour market position is based upon the source of income, economic security and prospects of economic advancement in the particular job they hold. The assessment of an individual’s work situation is based upon the location of the job in the system of authority in the workplace and the extent of autonomy involved in the job. The key things to note about the NS-SEC are: the intention was to ground the class categories in theoretical and conceptual work on class in Sociology; Goldthorpe’s work was crucial, as is clear to anyone who compares the NS-SEC classification with the previous Goldthorpe’s classification; as such, the classification is rooted in a neo-Weberian conception of class.
how class affects outcomes, we need to focus both theoretically and empirically on the processes involved.

In recent years then class analysis has been under significant attack. In part this results from critiques of the work of class analysts, but it also reflects both changes in the intellectual climate, in particular the rise of anti-foundationalism and the ‘cultural turn’, and changes in society. The ‘cultural and linguistic turn’ in Sociology has led many to reject the idea that class is a key factor affecting identity, because class as used by most empirical Sociologist is viewed as an essentialist category. Here, class is often seen as strongly associated with Marxism as a grand narrative and grand narratives are unsustainable. Of course, not everyone has fully embraced the cultural and linguistic turn, although few now see culture as a simple reflection of objective class positions. Rather, many sociologists are dubious about the utility of class analysis because of the changes in contemporary society. In particular, many have emphasized that the last 30 years have seen: massive changes in employment relations and occupational structures; increased and diversified feminization of the workforce; long term unemployment; a decline in the proportion of manual workers in the labour force and the rise of the service sector; increased flexibilisation of labour, involving in particular deskilling and reskilling; job insecurity; increased globalisation of both capital and labour markets (see Cannadine, 1998, p.4).

Overall then, many have identified an impasse in class analysis to which there are three possible responses. Some, for example, Goldthorpe, Marshall and Wright, have defended class analysis, and especially either a Weberian or Marxist based class schema with few concessions. As such, they have paid scant attention to their critics, to social changes or to the role of other social divisions. Others, for example, Paluksi and Waters (1996), who we focus on in the next section, have pronounced the death of class. Finally, in response to various critiques of class analysis, some authors, for example Savage (2000), Crompton(1998), Crompton et al (2002) have attempted: ‘to reposition class analysis within sociology by undertaking a critical review both of class analysis and the
preoccupations of contemporary sociology’ (Savage, 2000, p. 8). I identify myself with this third strategy and outline the position I adopt in the third section of this paper.

**ii) Rejecting the Validity of Class Analysis**

Palulski and Waters (1996, p.4) argue strongly for the death of class: ‘classes are dissolving and … the most advanced societies are no longer class societies.’\(^3\) So, they contend that class societies are historically specific societies. More specifically, Palulski and Waters’ (1996: p. 10) see class theory as based on four propositions: economism; groupness; behavioural and cultural linkage; and transformational capacity. They argue that none of these propositions holds in the contemporary world:

- **Economism:** They assert that the separation of ownership and control and deindustrialisation have changed the nature of capitalist political economies. Consequently, patterns of social stratification are much more complex than they were in the past. To Palulski and Waters economism over-emphasises the structural nature of both economic and broader social relations. In particular, they stress the subjective, rather than the objective, nature of occupational hierarchies.

- **Groupness:** In their view, classes are not ‘real’ features of the social structure with precise boundaries and distinct differences between them. Perhaps more crucially, Palulski and Waters argue that putative ‘classes’ have no collective identity or class consciousness, in large part because there are no longer what they call ‘communities of fate’ – areas, particularly working class areas, where people live and work closely together and thus share experiences and views. From this perspective, the geographical mobility and flexible working which is a feature of contemporary life has broken up these close links, leading to a decline of collectivist values and a growth of individualism. The associated social mobility has resulted in a variety of different types of identity politics.

- **Behavioural and Cultural Linkage:** Palulski and Waters’ argument is that the broader choice of behavioural and cultural forms and values available in a more

\(^3\) In fact, they distinguish (1996, p.5) between class theory, in which, they argue, class is the sole determinant of outcomes, and class analysis, which sees class as a privileged explanatory variable.
complex, postmodern, society has led to a consequent increase in the diversity of preferences. So, preferences are certainly not simply related to one’s economic position; individuals aren’t bearers of social class. Rather, in their view, almost everyone has choice. They argue that there is much more limited competition for scarce resources than in the past, structured privilege has almost disappeared, so most have the resources to pursue, and achieve, their preferences. At the same time, there is no hierarchy of taste. There are differences of taste, but no non-discursive grounds on which to claim that some taste is higher/better than other taste (people can claim better taste, but it is merely a claim that will inevitably be contested and subverted). Of course, there are social differences, but the differences are not rooted in the field of production, but rather in the field of cultural consumption: ‘taste, fashion and lifestyle are the key sources of social differentiation that displace both class and political affiliation’ (1996, p. 121). Groups can exercise social power, but this is based on the dominance of their discourses of cultural consumption, not on their access to economic resources.

- **Transformational Capacity:** To Pakulski and Waters the move towards a postmodern, complex, world of overlapping and unfixed identity has inevitably led to the disintegration of class-based collectivities (trade unions and socialist parties) and of class based politics; contemporary politics is individualised, not collective.

From this perspective ‘class is dead’. However, it seems to me that Pakulski and Waters construct a straw man; a very economistic, Marxist, conception of class to which few, if any, modern Sociologists, even modern Marxists, would adhere. Of course, Pakulski and Waters could claim, probably would claim, that, unless a class theorist adheres to their 4 characteristics of class analysis, then they are not a class theorist, or presumably a Marxist. Yet, there are many Sociologists who do regard class as an important feature of contemporary society (Savage, Crompton, Devine and Scott, to name but a few), but do not hold to those principles. In my view, the test is whether class analysis as specified by a particular theorist in the light of contemporary debates, helps us explain/understand
certain social actions; in our case young people’s understanding of, and relation to, politics.

In Palulski and Waters’ view, society is not characterised by structured inequality, rooted, to a significant extent, in access to economic, and related social and cultural, resources. Rather, it is complex, contested and constantly changing experience. In contemporary society, class, and indeed society, are social constructions, existing only in terms of our understandings of them⁴. While I acknowledge the importance of moving beyond an approach that merely treats class as an independent variable, seeing it also as a lived experience, I do not share Palulski and Waters’s view that ‘lifestyle’ has become the chief basis of social divisions. Of course, society is more complex than it was and cultural values and patterns of cultural consumption do not simply reflect economic relations or access to economic resources. However, the claim that most, if not all, access to sufficient scarce resources to make lifestyle choices⁵ does not stand up to any empirical analysis and it would not be shared by most of our respondents as we will see below. Indeed, in almost all advanced capitalist societies inequalities of wealth and income have increased over the last two decades (Gottschalk and Smeeding, 1997).

As such, in my view, the UK is characterised by structured inequality; inequalities of access to scarce resources based on class, gender, ethnicity etc. which persist over time and constrain and facilitate the life chances, and indeed the access to certain lifestyles and modes of cultural consumption, of individual agents.⁶ Here, I agree with Crompton and Scott (2002, p.6) who argue that it is: ‘(essential for) class analysis to take on board the extensive changes that have been taking place in the spheres of production and

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⁴ Interestingly Palulski and Waters don’t make clear their ontological position. However, they argue strongly that economic class did structure society in early capitalism; certainly not an anti-foundationalist position. Yet, their description of contemporary society has a very culturalist, even anti-foundationalist, tinge.

⁵ For example, they argue (1996, p. 79): ‘if class is dependent on the distribution of material property then an equalized redistribution of that property is consistent with the decomposition of class’.

⁶ It is also worth emphasizing, as Skeggs (2000, p.21) does that: ‘Class as the central object of analysis has a different place in the different theoretical spaces in Sociology. Those who work on education and health have never noticed a ‘retreat from class in the same way as those who work on feminism, race and sexuality’
consumption in class societies and to recognize the interdependence of class, gender, ethnicity and age’. However, my concern here isn’t to defend this position at any length, rather I want to make clear where I stand. As such, I begin by outlining my view that class should be seen as a structured lived experience. In particular, I briefly consider the work of Pierre Bourdieu which best articulates some of the key elements of my approach.

iii) Class as Structured Lived Experience?
However, first I need to make it clear what I understand by ‘lived experience’.

a) What is Lived Experience?
The idea of lived experience might seem inevitably to privilege the view of the actor. Yet, the interpretation of the observer, in this case the social scientist, is always involved. We need to bear this in mind when we consider the four positions we can identify on ‘lived experience’, in part because these positions reflect broadly different ontological and epistemological stances.

i) Lived Experience as a Possession
Some sociologists and cultural analysts see experiences as something we can gain or possess. So, we can access the experience of others, perhaps those whose voice has not be heard in Political Science, Sociology or the study of history, in order to question dominant accounts. In criticising this position, many have suggested that this view remains foundationalist as the experience of those without voice is appealed to as being ‘true’. In addition, the suggestion is that we, as observers, can discover the ‘real’ understandings of those we observe.

ii) Lived Experience as Belonging
A second position sees experience both as a thing that is possessed by the individual and also as involving a process which defines the group to which the individual belongs. This position rests on what is usually known as standpoint epistemology. Here, the view is that the only people who can understand an experience are the people who are experiencing, or have experienced, it. So, the only people who can understand the experience of women are women (not men), and the only people who can understand the experience of black women are black women (not white women or black men). Objectivity is possible,
but only for those privileged because they share the same experience as those they observe.

iii) Lived Experience as a Process.

Here, the argument is that individuals, or subjects, have experiences; they are constituted through experience. In this view it would be claimed that experience is at once an interpretation and something to be interpreted. As such, experience is neither ‘self-evident’, nor uncontested. This is clearly based upon an anti-foundationalist ontological position. Here, we are involved in interpreting those subjects’ interpretations of the world; the double hermeneutic is at the core of this position. From this position, it is also crucial that we are reflexive about our interpretations as observers; we, as observers, are partial, in both senses of the term, and we must, as far as possible, acknowledge those partialities.

iv) Lived Experience as a Structured Process.

This position shares much in common with the previous one, but I spend more time discussing it, because it is the position adopted here. I acknowledge the central importance of the double hermeneutic. So, an agent’s understanding of the world, of meanings and actions, crucially shapes her/his behaviour. At the same time, there is no objective, non-fallible, knowledge; although there is a real world independent of our knowledge of it, the way we, as social scientists, interpret the world is theory-dependent. As Cruickshank puts it (2003, pp.1-2): ‘This (realist) view of knowledge holds that there is an objective reality, and instead of hoping one day we will somehow have absolute knowledge, the expectation is that knowledge claims will continue to be better interpretations of reality. As knowledge claims are fallible, the best we can do is improve our interpretations of reality, rather than seek a definitive, finished ‘Truth’”.

Nevertheless, our theories do make claims both about how this ‘real’ world impacts upon our understandings of it and about our behaviour. As such, experiences are structured by ‘real’ world processes. Thus, a society like the UK is characterised by structured inequalities which effect, but by no means determine, the lived experience of citizens. In ontological terms, this position is foundationalist and in epistemological terms realist, more specifically critical realist.
As such, my starting point is simple. First, I agree with Cannadine when he argues (1996, pp.19-20):

where Marx was onto something was in his insistence that the material circumstances of people existence – physical, financial, environmental – do matter in influencing their life chances, their sense of identity, and the historical part which they and their contemporaries may (or may not) play. Whatever the devotees of the linguistic turn may claim, class is not just about language. There is reality as well as representation. Go to Toxteth, go to Wandsworth, go to Tyne side, go to Balsall Heath, and tell people who live in the slums and the council estates and the high rise ghettos that there sense of social structure and social identity is no more than a subjective rhetorical construction. It seems unlikely they would agree. (…) Class, like sex, may indeed take place in the head: but it has never existed solely in the head or the eyes or the words of the beholder. Social reality always keeps breaking in.

Second, like Savage (2000, p.51), I would argue that the UK is marked by very unequal access to economic resources:

Broad patterns of wealth-owning and income in Britain point quite unambiguously to the existence of a very small class who earn their wealth from property and a much larger class who predominately rely on income from their labour, in the form of wages and salary.’ (…) ‘Recent trends have seen a clear polarization, which has favoured the wealthy. Forms of rentier income deriving ultimately from property ownership are more unequally distributed that is income from the labour market, and the expansion of shareholding and investment income in the last 20 years has therefore accentuated, rather than reduced economic inequality.

However, I recognize that access to economic resources doesn’t determine actions and thus outcomes. Agents act, not structures, and as Savage argues (2000, p. 95): ‘class
processes work through the individual’. As such, and here I follow Savage again (2000. p. 67):

Class impacts on economic inequality not just cross-sectionally, as a kind of macro structure which affects the income people can command, but also as something which individuals perform, by accumulating different potentials to unlock income sources which operate later in life.

Here, the relationship between structure and agency is seen as dialectical, that is interactive and iterative. Structures constrain and facilitate agents, but agents interpret structure and, in acting, can change them. In addition, a series of factors clearly mediate between class structure and the individual: educational qualifications; individual ability; work-life mobility (again see Savage, 2000, p.88, for a fuller discussion). At the same time, the material, that is access to economic resources, doesn’t determine the ideational, that is culture. Rather, the relationship is again dialectical, so we need to consider how economic resources constrain and facilitate access to, and the role of, culture, while culture can change both the broad economic structure and individuals access to economic resources.7

All this means that I view class as a structured lived experience. As such, I reject most empiricist approaches to class, without accepting that class is an obsolete concept, by arguing that class is not a fixed category – defined in most of the approaches we have considered to date largely in terms of occupation – rather it is something we live, that we experience. Given this approach, I focus on how people experience or live class. Here, the double hermeneutic is taken as axiomatic and the focus is on understanding. Given this view, my aim is to understand others’ understandings of the world. In this approach class is a lived experience, part of the individuals’ understandings of the world, which we, as observers do our best to understand. It is not simply an ‘objectivé’ independent

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7 As Devine and Savage (2002, p. 195) put it: ‘What establishes the relationship between class and culture (ie, what establishes the classed nature of cultural dispositions) is not the existence of class consciousness, or the coherence or uniformity of a distinct set of cultural dispositions. Rather, the relationship is to be found in the way in which cultural outlooks are implicated in modes of exclusion and domination’
variable to be plugged into a regression analysis. However, an individual’s lived experience is not open; it is clearly affected by her/his life chances, which are constrained or facilitated by his/her position in the web of structural inequalities that characterise contemporary society.

iv) Bourdieu as a Way Forward?
I treat class as a lived experience, but as a lived experience that is structured. In that way I not only reject Palulski and Waters’ view that class is dead, but I also argue that an individual’s experience of class is shaped by her/his access to economic, social and cultural resources. For this reason I am very interested in Bourdieu’s analysis (1984; 1983) of class and in particular in the concepts of economic, cultural and social capital and the relationship between them. In my view, these ideas help us make sense of our respondents’ experience of class and of their understanding of politics; as we shall see when we consider the data below.

Of course, some critics may feel that it is not possible to fuse Bourdieu’s views on class with an approach that stresses that class is a lived experience. However, I, like Bourdieu, hold to a middle ground on the structure/agency problem; in my view how our young people experience the world is through a habitus8 which reflects the structured inequality in the UK. As such, for me, experiences are structured by the habitus which reflects ‘real’ world processes. Thus, as I argued, a society like the UK is characterised by structured inequalities that help shape the habitus, and thus the lived experience of citizens.

Pierre Bourdieu (1983) moves beyond the idea that capital is solely based upon material exchanges, identifying two main "non-economic" forms of capital, cultural and social

8 Habitus is one of Bourdieu’s most important concept and it illustrates his concern to find a middle ground in the structure/agency debate. Habitus refers to socially acquired and culturally embodied systems of predispositions, tendencies or inclinations. These are ‘deep structural’ propensities, involving both classification and assessment and they are embodied in all aspects of our life – including the way we walk, talk, sit and eat. Habitus doesn’t determine actions and agents are in Bourdieu’s terms: ‘the practical operator of the construction of objects’. However, to Bourdieu the social construction of reality is structured because all our cognitive structures have social origins which are enscribed in the habitus.
capital. In Bourdieu’s view these different types of capital are acquired and exchanged, and converted into other forms. Given that the structure and distribution of capital also represent the inherent structure of the social world (here, in my view, we can see Bourdieu’s realist credentials), Bourdieu argues that an understanding of the multiple forms of capital will help understand and explain the structure and functioning of the social world.

The term cultural capital represents the collection of non-economic forces such as family background, social class, varying investments in, and commitments to, education, different resources, etc. that influence academic success. Bourdieu distinguishes three forms of cultural capital: embodied; objectified; and institutionalised. The embodied form is directly linked to, and incorporated within, the individual and represents what they know and can do. Embodied capital can be increased by investing time into self-improvement in the form of learning. As embodied capital becomes integrated into the individual, it becomes a type of habitus and therefore cannot be transmitted instantaneously. The objectified state of cultural capital is represented by cultural goods, material objects such as books, paintings, instruments, or machines. They can be acquired both materially, with economic capital, and symbolically, via embodied capital. Finally, cultural capital in its institutionalized state provides academic credentials and qualifications that create a: "certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power." (1983, p. 248) These academic qualifications can then be used as a rate of conversion between cultural and economic capital.

Throughout his discussion of cultural capital, Bourdieu suggests that cultural capital isn’t inherited in a genetic sense, rather it is learnt and grown, initially in the family. He argues that the ability and talent of an individual is primarily determined by the time and cultural capital invested in her/him by her/his parents. Similarly, Bourdieu argues that:

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9 Bourdieu also identifies a fourth type of capital, symbolic capital, which involves the acknowledgement and legitimation of other forms of capital; it is this legitimation process that converts capital to power. Consequently, cultural capital has to be legitimated before it can have symbolic power.
"the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (1983, p. 244) (and) "the initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital." (1983, p. 246) Based upon these claims, it appears that cultural capital regulates and reproduces itself in a similar fashion to habitus. According to this model, families with a given cultural capital would invariably produce children with a similar level; this might seem a very structuralist position. However, Bourdieu is not a determinist; he rather suggests that structures privilege, by facilitating those in a privileged position and constraining those who are disadvantaged.

Bourdieu defines social capital as: "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." (1983, p. 248) As such, an individual's social capital is determined by the extent of her/his social network. Two things are crucial here. First, the sum of the resources, both cultural and economic, held by the members of the network and, second, how effectively an individual can use, or activate, that network, so calling on its resources. According to Bourdieu, social networks must be continuously maintained and fostered over time in order for them to be called upon quickly in the future.

Obviously, the possibility of conversions between different types of capital and the rate, both in the sense of the extent and of the exchange rate, of conversion is crucial. Bourdieu, in fact, argues that all types of capital can be derived from economic capital through varying processes of transformation. In Bourdieu view, cultural and social capital are fundamentally rooted in economic capital, but they can never be completely reduced to an economic form. Rather, agents always have space to grow their social and cultural capital, particularly through education. Again, economic capital may facilitate or

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10 So, as Skeggs argues (2000, p.14): ‘What ultimately defines cultural capital as capital is the ability to convert it into economic capital’. 
constrain individual attempts to grow social and cultural capital, but it doesn’t determin
it. At the same time, social and cultural capital, to an extent, remain effective because
they conceal their relationship to economic capital.

In effect, Bourdieu is examining how class actually affects people’s actions. He argues
that there is a close link between economic, cultural and social capital. Those with more
economic capital have privileged access to cultural capital – books, quality newspapers,
galleries, theatres, museums and, above all else, education. As such, they develop
particular values and interests associated with ‘high culture’ and high culture is
celebrated, while ‘low culture’ or ‘popular culture’ – TV, magazines, the tabloid press,
sooccer - is looked down on. This cultural capital, especially when linked to cultural
capital, gives greater access to, more powerful, social networks. However, both cultural
and social capital make you better placed to acquire more economic capital, for example
through access to better jobs. To Bourdieu then, this is a virtuous circle; it can be broken,
but it is powerful.

Even this brief exposition of Bourdieu’s position shows it is not unproblematic. It can
seem economistic,11 although, as we emphasised, he is insistent that economic capital
does not determine other forms; it merely acts as a facilitator for those who possess it and
a constraint for those who don’t. Similarly, it is difficult not to look somewhat
sceptically about Bourdieu’s argument about popular culture in an area where ‘celebrity
culture’ seems to grip almost everyone and such celebrities earn millions.12 Nevertheless,
I am interested in Bourdieu’s position because it goes beyond correlations and predictive

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11 So Devine and Savage (2002, p. 193 argue: ‘there is still a tendency in Bourdieu’s work to ‘reduce’
cultural forms to specific material bases and to adopt an instrumentalist orientation to culture. Despite his
own intentions, a somewhat crude and simplistic economic determinism still underpins his account of the
relationship between class and culture’.

12 Savage offers three criticisms of this aspect of Bourdieu’s work, arguing that he: i) proposes a cultural
hierarchy, with middle class taste seen as superior and the increasing existence of what Peterson and Kern
(1996) call cultural omnivores, that is people adopting aspects of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, ignored ii) pays
no attention to popular cultural; iii) and fails to recognize both the stigmatisation and the importance of
working class culture.
models to offer a view of how class might affect young peoples’ attitudes to life and politics. At the same time, it recognises the continued resonance of class and offers an understanding of how it affects contemporary society.

v) Conceptualising Lived Experience and Methodology

How one conceptualises lived experience clearly has methodological implications. So, if we adopt the first position discussed earlier, then we merely need to listen to the voice of those who are normally unheard; there is little stress on how our experiences affect how we interpret their experiences. Here, the second level of the double hermeneutic is unacknowledged. In contrast, if we accept standpoint epistemology then the only people who can understand a group’s experience are others from that group. If we adopt this position, then any attempt by David Marsh, a middle class, white, old male, to understand any other group’s understanding of the world is doomed to fail. In my view, this makes social science, as the study of society, next to impossible, as we can’t communicate understandings: how can someone within that standpoint communicate with someone outwith that standpoint?

If, in contrast, the researcher adopts either the third or fourth positions, then the focus is on the use of ethnographic methods to tease out others’ understanding of their worlds, and then the use of reflexivity to reflect on our understandings of their understanding. The double hermeneutic is acknowledged, but standpoint epistemology is rejected as too narrow. It is on this basis that we adopted an ethnographic approach to the study of young people’s views of politics. The aim of our empirical research was to understand young people’s understanding of politics - not to impose a conception of politics on them. However, we were crucially concerned to see how people’s conception of politics was different depending on their position in the social structure. As such, class, gender and ethnicity are crucial dimensions to our analysis, although they are not treated simply as variables, but also as lived experiences.

There is not the space here fully to discuss our methodology, although there is more detail in the appendix. However, three points are crucial. First, our methods reflects our
ontological and epistemological positions, which also inform our critique of the mainstream literature on political participation (O’Toole et al., 2003a and 2003b), the substantive focus of the work, and our focus on the idea of class (and indeed gender, ethnicity and politics) as lived experience. In order to determine how the respondents themselves conceive of class, we needed respondent-led data, necessitating the use of open-ended techniques and, hence, of qualitative, ethnographic, methodologies.

Second, the use of qualitative focus groups and semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to avoid imposing a definition of class etc. by allowing respondents to talk in their own terms. Through the reflexive and flexible process of focus groups and qualitative interviewing, the researcher is able to interact with the respondents to probe their views of class etc. Third, we used photographic images as the stimulus for discussions in the groups. So, we didn’t ask directly about class etc. Rather, the respondents narrated their understandings of the pictures and, in doing so, offered their understandings.

vi) The Analysis

As such, we treat class as a lived experience, in the sense that we are concerned to examine how our respondents view, live and experience class. Our method allows us to approach their understanding and experience of class indirectly, because we did not ask our respondents about class, rather we examined the extent to which they narrated the images we presented to them in class terms. By this we do not mean we were just interested in whether they talked about class, because, as we shall see, the term was rarely mentioned. Rather, we were concerned to establish whether, in our terms, class was something they lived. To put this another way, we wanted to examine the extent to which our respondent’s access to economic, cultural and social capital, in Bourdieu’s terms, could be seen to affect their life, including their lifestyles and their life chances, and to what extent they recognised this fact of life. Finally, we wanted to establish whether their experience of class affected their understanding of politics. At the same time, throughout we are interested in how our respondent’s experience of class interact with their experience of other structured inequalities, particularly ethnicity and gender.
Consequently, my presentation of our results is divided into four sections. First, I discuss the extent to which our respondent’s experienced class. Second, I unpack this discussion focusing on the interaction between economic, cultural and social capital in the construction and operation of class. Third, I look at some of the interactions between class, gender and ethnicity, although we also return to those in other chapters. Finally, I focus upon the relationship between class, viewed in our terms, and our respondent’s understanding of politics.

**i) The Death of Class?**

As we saw, Palulski and Waters would have us believe that class is a thing of the past. In particular, they suggest that: social stratification is more complex than it was; there is no identity based on ‘communities of fate’; that consumption has replaced production as the key basis of social divisions in contemporary society, leading to a proliferation of choice; and that class based collectivities have disintegrated. I take issue with the first three of these assertions and suggest, while the last may be accurate, the reason for it does not lie mainly in the development of a post-modern society, but rather in a continuing depoliticisation of British citizens in a way which suits the interests of those who control the polity and the economy. I consider the first three of these assertions here and return to the last one in the final section of this analysis.

**a) The Increased Complexity of Social Stratification**

Of course, there is no doubt that social stratification patterns have changed very significantly over the last century; it would be amazing if they hadn’t. However, equally, there is still very significant inequality in the distribution of both wealth and income in the UK and this hasn’t been reducing in the past three decades. At the same time, if inequality is to affect attitudes or actions it must be through individuals perception, or perhaps more crucially their experience, of those inequalities. Our key point here is that, while none of our respondents used the concept of class in their everyday discourse, many evoked ideas of class when narrating a story about the photographs which they considered. Nevertheless, and crucially, respondents from different backgrounds narrated class in different ways; for those from an advantaged background class was in a sense something others, the disadvantaged, experience, while to the disadvantaged, it was
something they themselves lived. Clearly, those respondents with lower levels of economic capital, lived a life which was very significantly constrained by that fact. Even a few excerpts from our transcripts give a clear indication of this difference between the narrations and the experience of the privileged and the disadvantaged.

So, one University student, recognised that class affected outcomes, but viewed it almost as something outside her experience; something that affected others:

**Interviewer.** Do you think some people are more or less interested in politics?

**H.M.** I think its probably more a middle class leaning maybe because they’ve got more time or something…I think maybe working class, kind of poorer people, I don’t think their views are really represented and stuff (…) they get a rough deal of things…that more people, I hate saying middle class *(laughs)*, people who are better off are more maybe a bit more interested.

The different reactions to a picture of a poorly dressed young woman with baby in a pushchair were particularly revealing. A white male from the New Deal training site commented:

that’s poverty innit [twins]. You know she’s pissed off with government, she hasn’t been provided for. Because that looks like a mad mental institution behind her, but it’s obviously council flats or something. You know, and the kids they aren’t wearing good clothes, do you know what I mean (…) probably bought from charity shops or something. Yeah, she’s depressed, she wants the government to do something about it. She just looks miserable.

Here, there is an immediacy, which clearly reflects personal experience, that is totally missing from the comments of male university student:

If she’s a single parent, she would, ah, she would probably have lots of difficulties in getting child care at a low cost. If she isn’t, yeah, if she isn’t able to do that she isn’t able to get a job and build a way out of there. So,
because of the fact there’s no good child care, she’ll probably stay in that situation for a while.

The same immediacy is evident in the response from another male from the YTS site, who, when asked in his interview about his job experiences, talked about his very real and immediate experience of being constrained by his educational socio-economic background:

Just YTS [Youth Training Schemes] and training courses, ‘cos I’ve been for some jobs and they’ve said previous experience was needed. If you’re doing like a job you need experience to do it, but they won’t train you… How do they do that?

b) Communities of Fate
In our view, it is also bizarre to claim that people, especially disadvantaged people, do not share, and to a significant extent feel they share, a ‘community of fate’. For example, our research certainly shows a close link between identity and locality in a variety of ways. As one indication, the only overt political action our respondents reported was very local, reflecting clear allegiance to a local community. The most notable example was reported by a Muslim man interviewed in the college site. He had been active in a concerted local effort, which interestingly was multi-racial, to clean up a local park, so it could be used by children, both physically, by clearing rubbish etc., and by driving out drug users.

It is also interesting that the most underprivileged of our respondents had the strongest sense of a ‘community of fate’. In this vein, the working class white boys from a comprehensive school in a ‘white ghetto’, when asked about their likely location in ten years time, without exception, expected to be on the same estate, close to their families and with the same friends. In an important sense, they had clear vision that they belonged to a community of fate.
One interview with two Asian women from the college site shows a clear discourse of belonging and division, which, to an extent at least, cuts across ethnicity:

K
Yeah, I've always lived here you know, about nineteen years I think. I moved here when I was about one.

Interviewer
Ah, you've never lived anywhere else in the city or …

K
When I moved here, I think there was a riot here.

Interviewer
Right, yes.

K.
Do you know about that?

Interviewer
Yes.

K.
I can't remember what it was about now; was it racism or something? I d’know, it was some sort of a riot and I remember Prince Charles come and my mom seen him (laughs).

K.
I know yeah, I know yeah, I know. It’s been, I’ve never really experienced any racism from around here. There’s a few white people, there’s a lot of blacks, there’s a lot of Asians. I've got on with them, but I've always kept myself to myself y’know and yeah and I've never really experienced any sort of racism here.

Ko.
Not around here.

K.
I suppose if you keep to yourself nobody says anything, then it’s not bad. It’s nice, not as bad as people say it is, but there’s a lot of local people, a lot of bad people, and, if your not from the area, then they do recognise you…
Interviewer.

Mm.

K

… and I think you are more likely to get mugged.

Once again, the picture of the woman with a pushchair provoked interesting discussions. Although most of our respondents were not parents, in both group and individual discussions they did recognise the difficulties of poverty and bringing up children. However, those respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds identified with the women in the picture in way that suggested the related to her ‘fate’ in a much more direct way than did more privileged respondents. Almost all the poorer respondents mentioned the quality of the pushchair or the need to focus on a child’s education as an exit route from the family’s situation. But, common to these discourses is an appreciation of the restriction of choice and this is clear in the response by one male from the New Deal site:

O.K, she does have a new pram and erm, the thing is, if you’re living in a place you can’t neglect everything, like if you’ve got kids you can’t really say O.K. we haven’t got any money, you’re going without food for the next couple of days, or you’re going to go without kind of necessities everyone needs a bit of pleasure …if you can’t really move into a bigger house.

These discourses or narrations don’t just appear; they are products of individual or shared experience. So, even though Yu has never been a woman passing boarded-up houses pushing a pushchair, he does have his own experience which allows him to relate to that woman’s experience. As such, Yu who lives in an area of high poverty, recognises the constraints on the woman’s horizons and life chances; the fact that the precarious nature of poverty denies people access to escape routes, with the possible exception of education.
c) *Lifestyle Choices*

Palukski and Waters, like others, focus on choice and lifestyle, emphasising choice and playing down the extent to which lifestyle choices are constrained by access to economic resources. In contrast, many of our respondents live and attempt to negotiate, those constraints. Our respondents clearly locate and identify people by the clothes they wear and the things they possess, but they don’t think that these are accidents of choice, rather they reflect the limited resources that the less advantaged have to make lifestyle choices. The image of the young woman pushing a baby in a pushchair consistently provoke discussion about these issues. Two examples are fairly typical of responses from the less privileged sites:

i)

**H.** Looks like she’s wearing a fake T-shirt as well; need I say more.

**AT.** Fake T-shirt (*laughs*); breadline.

**SC.** Working class, well maybe.

**AT.** She’s a button missing as well

**S.** Yeah she’s got a button missing on her cardigan.

ii)

**Tr.** It looks like they’ve got nowhere to live. It looks like they’re living in a hostels or something.

**D.** It looks like they’ve just come off the streets and some social worker has found them somewhere to live.

**J.** ‘Cos she’s got a button missing and that off her top.

**D.** Yeah, actually she does look a bit like a tramp, don’t she. I don’t mean in a bad way.

**J.** No, her hair’s done nice.

**D.** But, that’s what it looks like.

**J.** But, look at her hair.

**D.** It looks like they’ve been neglected. I’m sorry them kids don’t look happy.

**K.** Na.

**D.** That reminds me of me when I was younger.
The line that Palulski and Waters argue comes close to suggesting that the disadvantaged are complicit in their own poverty, in terms both of their lack of capital and their lack choice. However, poverty and the related limited lifestyle choices are lived daily by many of our respondents. They construct discourses to explain, understand and negotiate this poverty of choice and to deny this is to fail to understand how they experience politics.

**ii) Bourdieu: Economic, Cultural and Social Capital**

Here, we look, first, at Bourdieu’s argument on cultural capital and its link to economic capital. D, who is male, white and a New Dealer, commented, when asked about the life chances of people like him, in his individual interview:

Yeah, nah, because say like in the 4th year they should do it [identify potential] so then they can determine what groups they go into in the fifth year. So, like they’re intelligent, but they don’t take their exams, they can end up in the dunce group. You know when they don’t deserve to be there, and they’re just labeled a dunce all through their school. And they have to work harder to try and improve themselves. But once they go to senior school they do need facilities, you know books. I don’t know what the government’s playing at. They should provide uniforms, because there’s single parents, you know. My moms a single parent and there was three of us, imagine forking out for three uniforms every year.

D here is talking directly to the point about cultural capital, its relationship to education and to economic capital – here his references are to his own experience of poverty. The reference to clothes is particularly important as clothes are an indicator of both economic and cultural capital. D recognises the importance of a ‘good’ education in deciding opportunity and access to future economic capital. Perhaps most interestingly, he sees this as a political problem, indeed a problem the Government should address. At the
same time however, he has no political involvement and little knowledge about, or interest in, formal politics.

The response of two women, K and Tr, who are white, single parents from the hostel site, in their focus group to the images of two politicians bear on the same issues:

K: To me they look like they’ve achieved something I don’t know what they’ve achieved and they look smartly dressed y’know which is good, erm presuming they’ve come from …
Tr : College probably …
K: erm good homes, like good upbringing ….  
Tr: good school.

Once again, here clothes are seen as a marker of home background and education and these, key elements in Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural capital, are viewed as clearly affecting life chances. Throughout this exchange the two women were identifying the men in these images as from a different background than themselves; though, interestingly, the term ‘class’ was not used.

Our respondents, particularly our underprivileged respondents, were aware of the unequal nature of life chances and how privilege affected attitudes and behaviour. One response was typical:

Some people do tend to have everything made for them. They’ve got themselves in a good job. They’re living comfortably, you know, they are eating meals every day. They don’t know what it is all about to be homeless, to not know where your next meal is coming from. Some people they don’t seem to really care when they see someone walking down the street looking scruffy. They tend to cross the road and clutch onto their handbags or whatever. Maybe if they were to stop and take a look into homeless people’s lives, then they would realise it’s not all about stealing a handbag and you
don’t want to smell bad. It’s ‘cos you’ve got nowhere to wash, you ain’t got no clothes to change into and you can’t wash your clothes.

Another quote, taken from the individual interview with M, a white male on the New Deal Programme, again reflects our respondents’ sense of socio-economic disadvantage, but it also addresses a key themes throughout our work, the remoteness of politicians and their lack of concern about people like the respondent.

**M:** Let them live in our shoes for a bit and see what its like and our ways. Do you know what he [Tony Blair] gets paid at all?

**Interviewer:** I know his wife gets paid more than him.

**M:** Yeah but she’s a judge innit or a lawyer…But its like he’s been brought up with a silver spoon, you’d want him to come over the other side for a week see what its like on that side like.

**Interviewer:** Do you think a week would be long enough?

**M:** I think it would kill him.

**Interviewer:** I think he could live on benefits for a week it’s when you’ve got to live on it for a year or two years or your life.

**MT:** Know the feeling; I’m 25 now and I ain’t even had a full time job.

Interestingly, many of our respondents could see the importance of cultural capital, without having read Bourdieu! So, one Asian male respondent from the New Deal site constructed an autobiography for the woman with the baby in the pushchair:

When she was younger, she probably never got the education she needed in order to go on to Further Education and whatever else to get a professional job to be in a kind of higher class, er, of social people…And I don’t really think it’s the fault of the individuals themselves…like being dependent on the person. Everyone should have a little independence, just in case things do go wrong, they can get out, get a job, work, you know bring up families as well, you know, juggle it, juggle these round.
The ‘do’ is particularly important here, as it indicates the high risk nature of the lives of those on a low income or in poverty. Although this respondent sees Further Education as a possible escape route from his family’s situation, he has direct knowledge and experience of the precarious nature of class.

In fact, our respondents had little difficulty in assigning class positions, even when they didn’t talk directly of class, to people in the photographs. This was the case regardless of the site. So, the focus group composed of sixth form students from a privileged school discussed a picture of a male political candidate in clear class terms:

**AT.** Looks like he’s had a good upbringing as well by his looks and that…. well, when I say proper I mean his mom and dad have probably got like professional occupations.
**SC.** Good qualifications and that …
**AT.** Probably got a bit of money and that.
**SC.** He looks like a stereotype Tory …
**AT.** Probably been to university and well you know what I mean.
**H.** His family were involved in politics before.
**N.** Public, private, school.

Overall, education is seen as an advantage, but also as a divide between people. Crucially, it is also viewed as a desirable escape route for your children, even if is not available to you as an individual. This is evident in the response by the focus group from the further education college to the same candidates’ image:

**K.** To me they look like they’ve achieved something, I don’t know what they’ve achieved, and they look smartly dressed y’know, which is good, erm, and presuming that they’ve come from …
**Tr.** College probably …
**K.** erm, good homes like, good upbringing …
Tr. Good school …
K. which is good, I don’t see why they should have gone through what I’ve gone through, or anything bad, or y’know, if they’ve done good, that’s good, that’s what everyone hopes for their kids.

All this may sound as though, I, and more importantly our respondents, see experience as totally structured, with no role for agency. However, the respondents were aware that individuals could alter their life chances. In this vein, one, very articulate, white man from the New Deal site was highly critical of his peers who just ‘played the system’:

Just knobs really. I’ve got friends doing it. They haven’t worked, you know they are 21 and haven’t worked since they left school. You know, left school, claimed Hardship allowance, then claimed the dole and stuff like that. It just isn’t right.

Most impressively, one white woman on the New Deal talked of her attempts to overcome structured disadvantage:

I know you’re not supposed to work when you are at school, but I actually did. I use to work in the evenings at a laundry company, ‘cos I used to hate (…) asking my mom for money. I’m highly independent. I can do it myself. I used to do all sorts, Avon and other things. I used to work in the evening during my GCSEs, come home at about 10pm, be up to 4am revising and then go to school. They use to go ‘why are you so tired’ and I’d go, “I just do Avon in the evening’.

iii) Class, Gender and Ethnicity
None of this should suggest that class is an experience lived in isolation from other bases of structure in equality, notably gender and ethnicity. It is particularly important to stress the interactions between these bases of disadvantage here. As just one example, the individual interview with C, a black, female, single parent from the hostel site, deals with
both how the lack of economic capital constrains all aspects of some of our respondents’ lives and the way in which class and gender are not separate experiences. Here, C is reflecting back on the photograph of what most of our focus groups thought was a single mother pushing a pram in the light of her own experience of having to use public transport with a pram:

C: I don’t think it’s just for the working class single working class people er that it’s no mother no pushchairs especially not to catch public transport. Where Birmingham, that’s one thing I’m glad, Birmingham has seen that there is mothers who do have to catch the bus, cos we can’t all afford taxis and cars. Yeah we need to get on a bus with our buggies and our heavy shopping.

Similarly, K and Ko, who I quoted earlier suggesting that they personally had experienced little racial discrimination, clearly indicated how ethnicity cross-cuts economic disadvantage. Here, the two women are talking about an incident which led to a mixed-ethnic group of young men being taken to the police station:

Ko.
Why do they always keep them separate; all the white people together, all the Asians together.

K.
Where’s that?

Ko.
You know, like when our mates went into, you know got into trouble, and they went into the (police) station.

K.
Who went in?

K.
Mentions name…

K.
Oh. Laughs.
and he goes, we went in, and he goes, they had all the Asians and all the blacks (*together*) and all the erm …

**K.**

the white people

**Ko.**

(*together*). There was like a row of them, and a row of them, and they were like, ‘cos it was the first time, y’know, you didn't expect gosh to see something like that. But, he (*their cousin*) goes all them lot (*the whites*) were getting off lightly and all us lot, we did, like, little minor things and they did even big things and they were like getting off, just getting off away with it, and they kept all of us for hours and hours …

**Ko.**

… for days. Some of them in prison, in lock-up, were there for about 2 or 3 days, without seeing a solicitor. But, they wouldn't let them see a solicitor.

**K.**

But, I think.

**Ko.** The officers were really, really, cheeky to them and like my cousin was saying, he goes you've gotta, you've gotta be really sweet to them, ‘cos otherwise they don’t let you see a solicitor. And, it was really, really, bad in there, ‘cos we were phoning up, phoning up, saying, oh we want to speak, we wanna speak, and they were like, oh! he doesn’t want a solicitor. What one of the police officers did was, we said to them we were gonna send a solicitor there, and he said, oh, O.K., then the thing was they never told him and we were waiting and waiting and waiting for hours and hours. So we phoned back and he goes oh, he doesn't want a solicitor. Great. So we phoned back an hour later and we go, can we speak to him please, and they put him on the phone and then we go, did you say that you didn’t want to see a solicitor and he goes no, I never said that. And like, yeah, they denied it. They lied, that’s how bad it is. So behind closed doors it’s all, it’s all different. It might look sweet when the officers are out and about in the street and you’re thinking, oh
they’re looking after us. But you don’t know what’s going on inside of them ...
so there you go (…) I don’t think I’ve got faith in police officers at all. I think they don’t, I’m not saying that they don’t do their job right, I think it’s their attitude towards society you know what I mean.

There is a very clear separation here between class and ethnicity, based on their experience of the race divide and how, in their view, that affects people’s experience with the police. There is an implicit division between and Asians and between whites, Asian and Afro-Caribbeans. However, At the same time, there is a clear identification with location, so that, to some extent at least, everyone, regardless of ethnicity, is seen as disadvantaged together.

iv) Class and Politics

None of our respondents were member of a political party youth section and none were members of an interest group. A few had been involved in local community action that might be regarded, even by mainstream work on political participation, as political. However, in important ways many of our young people lived politics. In particular, those from disadvantaged groups had direct experience of poverty and saw that as a political issue. So, one white, male, New Dealer, when asked if poverty was a political issue, responded: ‘yeah, it is ignored. There are loads of people in poverty and that, or in run-down council estates’.

Such respondents experienced social exclusion and poverty, both in an obvious economic sense, but also as reflected in the poverty of choice available to them. This is very well summed up in the response a white, male, from the hostel site gave when asked about his life experiences:

**Interviewer.** So what opportunities do you think (the government) … should have given you that they didn’t?

**M.T.** Er they give me a giro, cos they’ve got no idea what to do or I don’t think they’d do that otherwise.
Interviewer. What sort of stuff have you tried?
M.T. How do you mean?
Interviewer. Y’know you say you’ve never had a fulltime job since you left school yeah?
M.T. I didn’t even have a paper round, sad ain’t it? (laughs)
Interviewer. They said you had learning difficulties in school and didn’t get that sorted out so you didn’t get the education that you could have got
M.T. Yeah.
Interviewer. ‘Cos they didn’t get them sorted out?
M.T. They just stuck me in the deep end sort of thing, swim or drown.
Interviewer. Children’s home, foster care and sort of juggling between those two, so you’ve gone through all that?
M.T. And more (Laughs)
Interviewer. …there’s been a lot of things in your life to do with politics, but what you’re saying is that what the government does that is what politics is?
M.T. That’s what I say. They look down on people’s lives sort of thing, really I’ll stick you there to see what happens to you, like a lab experiment sort of thing, that’s what it felt like.
Interviewer. Does it still feel like that?
M.T. Er, mostly yeah. I was just thinking what I would have been if I wasn’t here (…) its like flicking a coin, heads I go that way.
Interviewer. Have people asked you along the way what you want to do, is this what you want?
M.T Er, yeah, but, when they’ve said it before, they’ve then gone ‘oh yeah you won’t be able to do that because you’re a so and so’. (Pause) I just think I’m better than them anyway, not being smug or whatever.
Interviewer. No, you survived against it all.
M.T. It’s the way it’s got to be.
Overall, most of our respondents reflected feelings of political inefficacy. Almost without exception they thought that people didn’t listen to them; that is as young people. However, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, this was compounded by the fact that they didn’t think people listened to people like them, that is the poor and the disadvantaged, regardless of age. Yet, it would be wrong to see our respondents as disinterested in politics or as apathetic, as much of the literature does and most politicians do. Rather, they are alienated from a political system to which they find it very difficult to relate.

At the same time, I want to finish by returning to how the disadvantaged and the privileged among our respondents viewed politics differently. At the end of our focus groups we asked the groups, as a group, to sort the images we had given them into a two piles, one for the images they regarded as ‘political’ and one for the images they regarded as ‘non-political’. There were noticeable differences between the sorts by the groups drawn from disadvantaged and privileged sites. As such, the two groups from the most privileged sites, the University and the selective school, sorted the images in the way one might have expected someone who had read the mainstream literature on political participation might do (of course, they had not read that literature!). So, they included in the political pile the overtly political images (the pictures of party candidates, demonstrators outside Parliament, political protest riots etc.) and those images which could be easily narrated in a political way (pictures of hospitals, schools and the police). Other images were placed in the non-political pile. In contrast, the less privileged groups included more images in the political pile; indeed, two groups put all the images in the political pile. So, they saw the picture of the woman pushing a pram, together with pictures of sports fans wearing national colours and old people walking in the park as ‘political’. In my view, this reflects their experience, ‘politics’ is something which is ‘done unto them’, and they, or ‘people like them’, can experience it anywhere.

vii) In Conclusion
Overall, in my view it seems difficult to accept Palulski and Waters view that class is dead. Indeed, it is impossible to read the transcripts of our focus groups and interviews
and conclude that class doesn’t exist or matter. Our respondents rarely talked of class, but they lived it. The groups we talked to with limited access to economic capital knew they had little and that many had much more. They also appreciated how that affected their life chances. They know that choice is not open, in a way that people from a more privileged background cannot.

At the same time, it seems to me that Bourdieu’s work has a great deal to offer. First, our work convinces me that, while class is a lived experience, it is an experience clearly rooted in, but not determined by, structured inequalities. Second, it seems clear to me, and our respondents often agreed, although of course with no knowledge or use of Bourdieusian terminology, that there is an evident link between economic, cultural and social capital. As such, for me, Bourdieu provides a fruitful way of conceptualizing class and using the concept to analyse outcomes.

However, our respondents didn’t experience class independent of other aspects of their lives. So, their experience of class is clearly gendered and raced and I am not arguing that class is in any sense privileged as an explanatory concept. Rather, my limited claim is that it should not be ignored or discarded.

More broadly, and this is the theme of the forthcoming book from which this paper is drawn, it is also impossible after reading out focus groups and interviews to see our respondents as non-political. In general, our respondents are not apathetic, rather they are alienated from a system which they feel is not interested in their concerns. More specifically, our respondents from disadvantaged groups live politics in a way those from more privileged groups don’t do so. They have more contact with the state, whether in the guise of the New Deal, the social security system or the police force. They often experience poverty in a very direct sense. As such, they are doubly alienated, as young people and as disadvantaged people.
APPENDIX: ON METHODS

The aim of our research, to explore how respondents themselves conceive of ‘the political’, precluded the use of quantitative methodologies, such as structured interviews or survey methods, where the data are necessarily framed by the researchers to allow statistical analysis. Rather, we wished to generate a high level of respondent-led data, and we therefore opted to employ qualitative interviewing techniques to allow respondents to report in their own terms and permit ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1993; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

The sample of respondents was selected to include a range of young people aged 16-25 years, who would provide a broadly representative sample across five categories of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education and contact with the state. In order to make contact with young people from these groups, we used six sites across the city of Birmingham: one further education college; two secondary schools (one comprehensive and one selective); one organisation working with young homeless people; one organisation which offers training and support for young offenders and those on the government-sponsored New Deal scheme; and undergraduates from outside the School of Social Sciences in the University of Birmingham.

Given that perceptions of the political influence notions of political participation, these were approached as two separate, but linked, research areas and explored through two stages: initially, we used focus groups to explore young people’s conceptions of the political; subsequently, individual interviews investigated young people’s perceptions and experiences of political participation in the light of the data generated in the relevant focus group. This approach helped to avoid predating the definition of political participation on any pre-determined definitions of politics, and therefore the risk of equating non-participation in a set of activities specified by us with political apathy.

We elected to use images within a focus group format to explore young people’s conception of the political. This was because images, more so than text or direct
questions, are multi-dimensional and allow respondents to interpret topics according to their own values and beliefs (Gaskell, 2000). It was important to recognise, however, that the images themselves would not be neutral with regard to the concept of the political. This meant that some definition of the political was inevitably embedded within the images. It was therefore necessary to draw on ideas and associations with very broad political content, and to make these explicit within the research design. We selected some broad themes focussed on: i) identity, such as Britishness, ethnic diversity, migration, patriotism, racism and protest; ii) social-economic inequality; such as poverty, single-parent families and homelessness; iii) political inclusion/exclusion, such as images of candidates, campaigners and protestors; and iv) citizenship, such as images of patriotism, social diversity, public space, and public services.

We asked respondents to free-associate with the images, in order to initiate discussion about the political. Following the free-association exercise, we then asked them to conduct a simple sort of the images, according to those they considered to be political, and those they did not (taking care to open the possibility that they may all be one or the other). This was done both to avoid obliging respondents to agree that the images were indeed political, and to encourage further group discussion on conceptions and definitions of the political.

The data generated in the focus groups were followed up in individual interviews, where young people’s understandings of politics were explored, through the development of a ‘concourse’ (Dryzeck, 1993) of dominant themes generated in the focus group, which we reflected on in one-to-one discussions. These concourses differed substantially across the groups, revealing the significant concerns and preoccupations within groups with differing demographic profiles. Drawing on the formulations of the political developed through group-work, we then investigated the respondents’ experiences of political participation.

The individual interviews also comprised autobiographical discussion to gather contextual information for analysis and to allow some comparison between respondents.
This section of the interview was also used to gather information about the life transitions experienced by the interviewee and to investigate how these affected their notions of the political. Youth research suggests that the period of transition from childhood to adulthood has become longer and more fragmented in the last few decades, due to changes in policies on young people’s entitlement to, and opportunities to access, education, housing and employment (Coles, 1995). Through discussion of respondents’ life experiences, we set out to explore whether these social conditions had any implications for how young people understood and experienced politics (Jones and Wallace, 1992) and whether such conditions produced different experiences of the political for young people as compared with adults (Du-Bois-Reymond, 1998; Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis and Sharpe, 2000)

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