'I'm not a working class novelist, anyway. Where I come from, if you call somebody working class, they smash your face in.'

Alan Sillitoe, *The Broken Chariot*

In *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton writes that,

In the early 1970s, cultural theorists were to be found discussing socialism, signs and sexuality; in the late 1970s and early 1980s they were arguing the toss over signs and sexuality; by the late 1980s they were talking about sexuality. This was not, need one say, a displacement from politics to something else, since language and sexuality are political to their roots; but it proved, for all that, a way of valuably reaching beyond certain classical political questions, such as why most people do not get enough to eat, which ended up by all but edging them from the agenda.1

This shift in academic priorities involved a reduction in the importance attached to the concepts of social and economic class integral to 'traditional' forms of socialism. For Marx and Engels, for example, the 'history of all society up to now is the history of class struggles'.2 Indeed, the existence of such distinct social groups provided the conditions for the future revolutionary transformation of society that 'abolishes [aufhebt] the rule of all classes along with the classes themselves'.3 Lenin argued that politics itself 'means a struggle between classes; means the relations of the proletariat in its struggle for its emancipation, against the world bourgeoisie',4 whilst for Louis Althusser the 'general contradiction' of society is 'essentially embodied in the contradiction between two antagonistic classes'.5 This emphasis on class is not peculiar to the Marxist tradition of socialism. George Orwell, for instance, who insisted that he was 'not a Marxist',6 also argued that 'before you can be sure whether you are genuinely in favour of Socialism… you have got to take up a definite attitude on the terribly difficult issue of class.'7

The concept of class, however, is absent from much recent theoretical and critical writing produced by 'cultural theorists' and literary scholars. Even Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, despite describing themselves as 'steeped' in 'Marxist theories', insist that 'we were from the beginning uncomfortable with such key concepts as superstructure and base or imputed class consciousness'.8 This discomfort is not confined to new historicists, of course, and indeed Gary Day argues that 'class has been ignored in literary studies for the last twenty years.'9 It is, moreover,  

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7 G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937; repr. London: Secker & Warburg, 1997), p. 113
undermined by postmodernist theories that have challenged even the forms of historical analysis upon which 'traditional' Marxism was founded. Frederic Jameson, for example, argues that the postmodern era is conceived as one in which 'the past itself has disappeared'. This paper briefly examines some of the ways in which postmodernist thought challenges established models of class, and argues that, despite recent economic and technological developments, such concepts remain essential to socialism.

As Day observes, "Class" is a notoriously difficult term to define because it occurs across a range of disciplines – sociology, politics, cultural studies and "literary criticism" – all of which give it very different meanings, weightings and explanatory values. This paper focuses upon two distinct but linked definitions. The first interprets class as a method of economic classification, and is most prominently associated with Marxism. Marx, as Day writes, 'explained class in economic terms', arguing that 'one class owned the means of production, while the other class owned nothing but their labour power, which they were obliged to sell in order to survive.' This use of the term is integral to the work of later Marxists, and is illustrated, for example, in Lenin's statement that 'Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it.' In this instance, it is the relation of an individual to the means of production, and in particular their ownership or lack of capital, that determines their class.

The term class, however, is not only used to designate a method of economic classification, but also the process of social identification upon the basis of status. Orwell argues that the 'English class-system', for example, 'is a money-stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system.' In this interpretation, classes are 'imagined communities', established by shared 'cultures' realised in such codes as accent, formal education and etiquette. This produces relatively inflexible identities. A member of the bourgeoisie would not become a proletariat simply because he or she lost their capital. Indeed, Orwell insists that 'Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor, but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but – this is the essential point – generally persist from birth to death.' This social model, therefore, not only locates an individual's class in the culture he or she internalises, but posits a broader range of categories than the binary division of 'bourgeois' and 'proletariat'. It is also conceives class as an identity, rather than as rational assessment of an individual's relation to the means of production.

These two models of class are, on the surface, logically distinct, insofar as the first describes an abstract economic structure and the second social practice. In numerous instances, however, they are interwoven, so that a shared economic position is conceived as a basis for solidarity and, indeed, tradition. Working-class communities, for example, are frequently interpreted as founded upon the common experience of labour, albeit one defined by region and industry as much as by relation to the means of production. The solidarity of the militant British miners in the nineteen-thirties, for example, was founded, not only upon their shared experience of labour and hardship, but upon the traditions, values and mannerisms developed through generations of direct social interaction. The anonymous author of Miners, Owners and Mysteries observed that the miners 'are clannish' because the men 'work dangerously together underground' and 'are born, educated, married and die, amongst a comparatively limited number of people in a comparatively small place.' The commitment to one another,

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11 Day, Class, p. 2
12 ibid., p. 7
13 V. I. Lenin, "A Great Beginning: Heroism of the Worker in the Rear. "Communist Subbotniks"
   in *On Culture and Cultural Revolution*, 84-116, pp. 97-8
14 Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 114
15 ibid., p. 208
16 The word 'abstract' is not intended to be pejorative. In his preface to the first edition of *Capital*, Marx himself writes that 'in the analysis of economic forms neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of assistance. The power of abstraction must replace both.' *Capital: Volume One* (1876; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 89-93, p. 90
17 [An observer], *Miners, Owners and Mysteries* (London: Waterlow & Sons, 1936), p. 4
demonstrated, for example, in the frequent strikes of the nineteen-twenties and thirties, depended upon their interpolation within such communities as much as their shared experience of exploitation. These localised commitments nevertheless provided the site of individual integration within the national and international working-class, as well as a foundation for collective action. This combination of material and social elements illustrates the concept of class as a classification of economic position and a basis of identity. These two elements, however, are both undermined by postmodernist theorists.

The terms 'postmodernist' and 'postmodernism' are themselves variously defined. Stefan Morawski observes that, although the 'concept of postmodernism is undoubtedly fashionable' it has 'come to suffer from semantic fuzziness', whilst Jameson argues that the 'concept is not merely contested, it is also internally conflicted and contradictory.' There are nevertheless a number of concepts, common to many if not all postmodernist texts, that are relevant to any contemporary analysis of class. The first is the idea that economic relations in the modern world are substantially different from those which preceded them. Jameson, although emphasising that he uses the term "late capitalism"… to mark its continuity with what preceded it rather than the break' insists that the 'postmodern' economy is characterised by 'forms of transnational businesses… its features including the new international division of labor, a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking and the stock exchanges (including the enormous Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship (very much including transportation systems such as containerization), computers and automation, the flight of production to advanced Third World areas, along with all the more familiar social consequences, including the crisis of traditional labor, the emergence of yuppies, and gentrification of a new-global scale.' Even G.A. Cohen, in no sense a 'postmodernist', exposes a transformation in the forms of capitalism analysed by Marx, when he writes that the 'engine of production in today's world is the transnational corporation, which absorbs and expels sets of workers at will.' Modern communication systems, electronic commerce and the flexibility of transnational companies, undermine a 'traditional' conception of class founded upon stable mass-production as well as its radical potential, which, as Marx recognised, was the product of the 'close association' imposed by capitalist industrialism itself.

These economic developments are combined with a simultaneous reconfiguration of the notion of individual identity, as part of a broader emphasis upon mutability and change. For Morawski, postmodernism is characterised by the 'idea of existence as wholly fluid and partaking in a carnivaldic emptiness', whilst Eagleton writes that for 'a less compromised variety of postmodernism, to exist historically is to break through the falsifying schema of History and live dangerously, decentrally, without ends or grounds or origins, letting rip the odd snarl of sardonic laughter and dancing ecstatically on the brink of the abyss'. In its utopian form, as Scott Durham argues, postmodernism incorporates the 'claim to have released the virtual potential of a new humanity to freely invent itself without reference to any founding essence or transcendental law.' The product of these ideas is the notion that individual identity is itself 'fluid', a product of narratives and exchanges that can be reinterpreted to produce new configurations and 'meanings'. An example of this is the 'neo-ethnicity', described by Jameson, which is 'something of a yuppy phenomenon, and thereby without too many mediations a matter of fashion and the market.' This undermines the concept of stable identities founded upon objective divisions, positing instead an 'ungrounded' process of continuous reinvention operating, for instance, through patterns of consumption.

19 Jameson, Postmodernism, p. xxii
20 Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism, p. viii
21 Jameson, Postmodernism, p. xix
24 Morawski, The Troubles with Postmodernism, p. 21
25 Eagleton, The Illusions of Postmodernism, p. 64
27 Jameson, Postmodernism, p. 341
These ideas challenge the notion of classes as ultimately founded upon objective material inequalities, and as stable collective identities that can be mobilised for political purposes. The economic and social analyses outlined above are, however, both problematic. In the first place, developments in the international economy are more uneven than the emphasis upon 'transnational corporations' implies. As Nigel Wheale observes 'Labelling global economic trends with the technocratic, post-industrial glamour of postmodernity provides a distorting framework for cultural analysis: the over-development of the societies which might consider themselves post-industrial is achieved at the expense of the structural under-development of the remainder of the globe'.

'Traditional' industrial processes have neither been eliminated nor reduced to historical curiosities. The forms of exploitation integral to capitalist economics, and indeed the dominance of capital itself have also persisted. The international economy, as Jameson observed, exhibits a 'continuity with what preceded it', and its persistent features include a fundamental division between those who control and those who lack capital.

A more important criticism of the postmodernist ideas outlined above concerns the notion of 'fluid' or 'ungrounded' identities. The capacity of many for individual reinvention is, in practice, constrained by the material conditions. As Alex Callinicos argues, in response to Foucault's question as to 'why "everyone's life couldn't become a work of art?"', that,

most people's lives are still... shaped by their lack of access to productive resources and their consequent need to sell their labour-power in order to live. To invite a hospital porter in Birmingham, a car-worker in Sao Paolo, a social security clerk in Chicago, or a street child in Bombay to make a work of art of their lives would be an insult – unless linked to precisely the kind of strategy for global social change which... poststructuralism rejects.

Redefinition through consumption, in particular, is prevented by financial constraints, but inadequate formal education, geographical immobility and poor housing conditions are also instrumental in limiting experience. In this context, class persists as both an imposed condition and a pragmatic response to shared circumstances. Individual class identities are not merely a narrative to be adopted or abandoned at will, or according to 'fashion', but a recognition of material conditions, and an attempt to construct forms of solidarity under adverse conditions. The utopian 'fluidity' of postmodernist theory is, therefore, a privilege rather than a general condition, or, to use Wheale's description, a 'parochialism of the first world entertained at the expense of everyone else'.

In Class in Britain, David Cannadine states that,

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 Tyneside, go to Balsall Heath, and tell the people who live in the slums and the council estates and the high-rise ghettos that their sense of social structure and social identity is no more than a subjective rhetorical construction, that it is nothing beyond a collection of individual self-categorisations. It seems unlikely that they will agree. Nor, for that matter, would the inhabitants of Edgbaston or Eastbourne, Belgravia or Buckingham Palace.

The statement identifies the material basis of class that sustains its social 'superstructure', the intricate network of ritual, tradition and etiquette that sustain class boundaries in social practice. It is not 'fluid' precisely because this basis itself is, at present, stable. It provides, however, a potential basis upon which to construct a future society that will enable 'humanity to freely invent' itself. As Eagleton writes, what 'any oppressed group has most vitally in common is just the shared fact of their oppression', but this 'negative collective identity' is 'bound over a period of time to generate a positive

30 Wheale, "Postmodernism", p. 61
particular culture, without which political emancipation is probably impossible.\textsuperscript{32} The relations established by class provide a basis for such a culture. They also, of course, provide a basis for collective political action. For Marx and Engels, 'since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need—the practical expression of necessity—is driven directly to revolt against the inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself.'\textsuperscript{33} This revolt is founded upon class, but nevertheless 'abolishes [aufhebt] the rule of all classes along with the classes themselves'. The result, as in the case of postmodernism, is a society that permits individuals to redefine themselves, and 'makes it possible for me to this today, and that tomorrow, to go hunting in the morning and fishing in the afternoon, to tend the cattle in the evening <and after supper to criticise,> just as I wish, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, herdsman <or critic>.'\textsuperscript{34} In this instance, however, class provides a basis upon which to establish such freedom, rather than being abandoned in the belief that such freedom has already been attained. It is an argument that remains compelling in a world in which economic inequalities remain conspicuous, and must remain central to future socialist theory and practice.

\textsuperscript{32} T. Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment" in Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), 23-39, p. 37
\textsuperscript{34} Marx and Engels, "From 'The German Ideology'", p. 132