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Do I have to Change my Class to be a Leader?

Exploring the challenges of social class for arts and cultural leaders

Karen O'Neill

Clore Leadership is a dynamic and inclusive resource for leaders and aspiring leaders in the arts, culture and creative sectors.

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Type: Provocation Paper for the Clore Leadership Fellowship 2017-18

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Published Under: Creative Commons
(Clore Fellowship funded by Arts Council England)



This paper was written as a part of the author's Fellowship with Clore Leadership in 2017-18.

About the author

Karen O'Neill

Theatre Fellowship supported by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation

Karen O'Neill is the Deputy Director of Kirklees Theatre Trust, which manages the Lawrence Batley Theatre and Creative Scene in West Yorkshire. Karen has previously held senior positions with Live Nation Theatrical and Clear Channel Entertainment, managing venues across the country. She passionately believes in the power of arts and culture to transform communities, regenerate towns and cities, influence positive social cohesion and drive economic development and growth. Karen is an International Fellow of the DeVos Institute of Arts Management at Kennedy Centre in Washington (2014). She is a Trustee and Board member of the University of Huddersfield Student Union and a Director of the Student Union Housing Company, Hudlets. Karen has also previously been a mentor for the Engage in the Visual Arts programme Extend.

Origin Stories

Living a double life can be hard – just ask Clark Kent, mild-mannered reporter by day and cosmic superhero when the need arises. Although I’m not faster than a speeding bullet, I do think that Mr. Kent and I share a dilemma: embracing our origins whilst trying to forge a career and life in a world where the traditions, reference points and unspoken etiquette are unknown to you.

My origin story starts in working class Liverpool in the eighties, in the industrial north, so choosing a life and career in the arts was definitely a new path. But I was lucky; with access to free higher education I was able to go to university and pursue my ambition to be part of the creative sector. Over the course of my journey I have become increasingly aware of and concerned about the balance between my working class identity, and the demands and expectations of the being part of a creative community. This anxiety has led me to question whether to succeed in the cultural sector and be an arts leader I need to leave my origins behind. Will my ability to have a dynamic career be dependent on whether I can separate my origin from my destination? Do I need to change my class to be an arts leader?

Identity Crisis

Like Superman, do working class arts leaders need to create a persona that breaches barriers in order to succeed? Over the course of the Fellowship, almost every arts leader I have met has been quick to assure me of their strong working class origins, and to describe the feeling of being different and wanting more. It is striking that the dialogue of moving away from our working class origins has become so ingrained in the narrative of becoming a leader in the arts sector.

Self-definition is a challenge. Social class and economic status can quickly become confused and overlap. The default for the classification of class is purely economic, however, culturally, we know it is far more complex than just our wealth. As our economic status improves, does our social class change with it? Phrases such as “mutton dressed like lamb” tell us that this is not the case. Social class is a battle of self-perception, the attitudes of others, the dilemma of our own self-definition and cultural signifiers that others use to categorise us. This would suggest that, despite changes in our economic status, unless we redefine our social class and remove/replace our signifiers, we are unable to access the exclusive creative class. For arts leaders, and the arts and cultural sector, this is definitely a problem. In 2018, the Panic! Report funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council noted, “a key characteristic of the British cultural and creative workforce is the absence of those from working class social origins”.¹

My Clore secondment was with Urban Splash and S1 Artspace, working on the development of a contemporary art gallery at Park Hill in Sheffield. Park Hill is a council estate just behind Sheffield train station, constructed between 1957 and 1961

¹ Brook, O., O’Brien, D. and Taylor, M. *Panic! 2018*, Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2018

to replace the previous back-to-back terraces as part of a movement to provide better housing for working class communities in post war Britain. It was designed in the Brutalism style, and listed in 1998, making it the largest listed building in Europe. The communities at Park Hill were moved out in the early 1990s and, after a long period of decline, Urban Splash begun the process of developing the flats. The part-privatisation scheme, in partnership with English Heritage, has begun to turn Park Hill into a mixture of apartments, business units and social housing. Due to be completed in 2022, part of the Park Hill vision is to create a world-class arts space on the site. S1 Artspace, an influential contemporary art organisation in Sheffield, has taken on developing a new contemporary art gallery based at Park Hill. With much of the Park Hill estate still to be developed, the creation of an elite arts building on this site is a contradiction to where art is normally presented. Park Hill is changing; with the first stage of development complete, this working class icon is slowly morphing into a symbol of middle class success. To allow its economic status to grow, Park Hill has had to remove the external signifiers of its council estate past, and replace them with floor to ceiling windows and artisan coffee. Do we, as arts leaders with working class origins, need to develop into middle class versions of ourselves?

In her book *Respectable*, Lynsey Hanley analyses her own journey from working class Birmingham to a career as an academic and author. She likens changing class to “emigrating from one side of the world to the other, where you have to rescind your old passport, learn a new language and make gargantuan efforts” , which makes you question why would anyone want to do it in the first place.² The question should be, what are the factors that pressure working class people into making this journey? What barriers exist that limit the working classes from being part of the creative class in the first place? Does the sector need to finally face up to the issue of social class?

What is your kryptonite?

The Panic! report noted that “the cultural and creative industries are marked by significant inequalities”.³ It surveyed people currently working in the creative sector, finding that only 18% came from a working class background. The report identified that those in the most prestigious or influential positions within the sector were overwhelmingly from an upper or middle class background. The research shows that these senior leaders still believed that meritocracy is the core reason for success within the sector, essentially believing that anyone with the right talent and drive was almost guaranteed to get the best jobs. These leaders also identify overwhelmingly as white middle class men – which presents the quandary that if those with the most influence don’t see social class barriers, then how can those on the other side ever break through? Additionally, this belief in meritocratic journeys suggests that those with the most power to make change simply do not see the need to create opportunities or address the challenges faced by the working class.

If talent is the pathway to success, then the working classes are immediately placed at a disadvantage. Only a small number have the strength of their talent to carry

² Hanley, L., *Respectable: The Experience of Class*, Penguin Random House, 2016.

³ Brook, O., O’Brien, D. and Taylor, M. *Panic! 2018: Arts and Humanities Research Council*, 2018.

them to the top without additional provision. All artists and creatives require training, guidance and support to realise their full potential; however, the current push towards STEM in education has seen a huge reduction in the support for creative subjects, meaning that talent is not being developed or nurtured. Year on year we continue to see a drop in the number of arts GCSE and A-Level awards particularly in schools in disadvantaged areas whose limited financial resources are plowed into the core subjects. This emphasis on STEM subjects is driven by schools desperate need to achieve exam results, securing future students in order to maintain investment from government sources. The removal of the arts as core part of our education system needs to be addressed, a move to STEAM rather than STEM would be fundamental to address the gap. The STEAM education system places the arts at the same level as the other core disciplines of science, technology, engineering and maths encouraging inquiry, innovation and creativity. The Future Jobs report from The World Economic Forum listed creativity as the top essential life skill and noted that in order to thrive in the fourth industrial revolution the UK needs creativity and imagination. Changes to the education system will not only ensure that the next generations are prepared for the challenges ahead but also that the exclusivity of the creative industries is broken down. Arts leaders and the sector should demand that the arts are a core part of all children's education not just those whose lucky few.

The reduction in support for creative subjects within the education system means that creativity has almost become an extra-curricular activity to be funded by individual parents, immediately placing opportunity and the pathway of creative meritocracy out of the reach of those most disadvantaged in our society. The 2017 Labour Party report, Acting Up, noted that 61% of those applying to drama school RADA in 2015-16 had a household income of over £35k, demonstrating that the majority of these students were from backgrounds better off than the national average UK household income of £25,100. In short, the majority of those given the opportunity to develop and enhance their talent are from middle and upper class backgrounds. Were the arts part of education given equal status with STEM subjects from the start then the chance to succeed based on your talent could be increasingly even across the class divide.

The exclusivity of a cultural sector driven by the homogenisation of those given the opportunity to develop their talent creates a counter-argument to meritocracy: it's not what you know, but who you know. The overrepresentation of the middle and upper classes within the cultural sector compared to other industries is notable. The Panic! report looked at the networks of those working within the cultural and creative industries, and demonstrated that, disproportionally, cultural workers only know other cultural workers and that their social networks exclude many professions traditionally held by the working classes. With limited occupational and social networks, it could be interpreted that cultural leaders have little or no interaction with the working classes, leading to cultural matching. Cultural matching is a recognised unconscious bias that informs which people we feel we connect with, and who we feel has value to our social capital. Essentially, we like people who are like us. Could this lead to challenges, with regards to recruitment and partnerships within the cultural and creative industries? We know that networking is a vital part of any sector but if we only wish to work with those like us, how do we ensure that the

sector has an open recruitment and development structure that doesn't rely on cultural matching? Javaad Alipoor notes in his 2018 article in *The Guardian* that "we need people from those backgrounds [working class] in positions of leadership – not only as artistic directors, producers and CEOs but as board members".⁴ But without access to the right networks and peers, how will that be achieved? Perhaps the strongest motivation to change class is to ensure that you are given the opportunity to move up the ladder taking on new opportunities and challenges however the evidence suggests that being working class places you at a significant disadvantage within recruitment processes.

So what's the plan??

When taking on any foe every superhero knows that having a plan is pretty important. As leaders within the arts and cultural sector it is time that we faced up to the nemesis of social class and began to plan how we are going to save the day, working within the current systems and policies to disrupt and empower change. We need to:

Advocate, campaign and support arts in education.

Rethink recruitment practices, discovering new ways to provide leadership and behind-the-scenes opportunities for those who might not feel they are for them.

Rethink how to create opportunities for artists, diversifying the artists we work with and question programming decisions.

Rethink how we are engaging working class communities to move from free participation to active attendance.

Treat social class like a protected characteristic until it is.

Many cultural organisations state a commitment to diversity and the goal to be reflective of the community around them. In order to recruit those who are missing from our organisation profile we have to ask ourselves are they applying and more worryingly if they do why are they not successful. Arts leaders need to review their recruitment procedures and policies, for example asking themselves whether an interest in a specific art form is really a requirement for entry or operational roles or can and should this interest be nurtured and supported by being part of a cultural organisation. By breaking down barriers to joining the sector, arts leaders create pathways through training and development allowing those joining the organisation to progress within and discover additional opportunities. If we continue to only recruit ready-made cultural workers then those without the class advantage will continue to be absent from our teams.

⁴ Alipoor, J., *The Guardian*, 5th June 2018 – <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/05/arts-working-class-people-britain-theatre>

Board demographics are just as important and are increasingly problematic for many cultural organisations. Traditionally boards consist of individuals providing middle and upper class skills such as HR, legal, finance, etc. The mindset of using boards to provide additional professional skills to an organisation has without question excluded the working classes from representation. Think of the expertise and support that a builder or certified electrician could bring to a building based organisation or a nurse to a participatory arts company. By seeking those unfamiliar to us to join our boards we can limit cultural matching and provide ways for the working classes to contribute to arts leadership. Unfortunately this situation is only being exasperated by the growing drive towards 'giving boards', resulting in only those that are economically able given the responsibility to steer the future of our cultural organisations.

The issue of representation of the working classes within the cultural sector extends beyond the employment statistics and the boardroom, and straight onto on our stages and gallery walls. Alipoor notes that "the arts world has turned the working class into a problem to be solved rather than audience members and artists to be developed" .⁵ Without the opportunity to make creative work about their own lives and experiences the working classes will be continually presented rather than reflected. Artists are working to change the narrative of working classes, to create a new aesthetic within the sector. This artist led sector challenge is dynamic and arguably the most powerful force for change. Many of these artists recognise the value and importance of the participatory arts sector as a place that many working class artists first engage with their creativity through free workshops and events. Recent trends of funding have seen many participatory arts organisations excluded from regular funding programmes increasing the pressure on this already under resourced part of sector. These organisations are part of our cultural ecology but are vital to engaging working class audiences and providing the first steps on a lifelong cultural journey. Whilst the investment in national targeted programmes is significant we must ensure that arts participation continues to be provided to all communities in the UK.

Social class intersects closely with race and disability; all are powerful indicators of life chances, but social class is still not a protected characteristic. In fact, the notion of class inequality as an issue for the sector has only recently become part of the debate for cultural workers, if not yet for the major funders. But as Richard Florida notes "Class... exerts an increasingly powerful influence over virtually every aspect of our lives".⁶ The reluctance to recognise social class as an indicator or protected characteristic seems to rely on the idea that it would inhibit social mobility and be too subjective to measure. But without pressure on the sector to address the issue of class, the barriers will not addressed.

The recent volume of studies and papers on this issue shows that the sector is aware of the issue of class, and with artists leading the way by creating work about class the debate has begun. But debate needs action to truly affect change. Some of that

⁵ Alipoor, J., *The Guardian*, 5th June 2018 –

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jun/05/arts-working-class-people-britain-theatre>

⁶ Florida, R., *The Rise of the Creative Class Revisited*, Basic Books, 2014, p.37.

action lies with the government and, through delegated responsibility, with the major funders. The monitoring of the social class of our leaders, workers and audiences within the cultural sector is not easy, but it is vital to ensure that those creating the work and managing the institutions truly reflect our society. Making social class a protected characteristic or at least a measureable characteristic is crucial if arts organisations are to diversify. Measuring and reporting of the social class of the cultural workforce, board and artists will create a national picture of the class representation allowing benchmarking and adding a new dimension to the monitoring of the sector. Questioning the class taboo by aligning it with other protected characteristics allows the sector to ask fundamental questions about the diversify of their organisations with data reflecting the intersection of characteristics creating a clear and informed picture of the inclusion and social reflective success of our cultural sector.

Much of how we define our social class is driven by the economics of our income, but on a more fundamental level it is informed by our taste and the experiences we were exposed to growing up. The exclusion of the working class as makers and facilitators of culture has limited the cultural taste of the sector. The 2016 Taking Part survey from the DCMS told us that the majority of the population are not engaged with cultural activities on a regular basis, corroborating that many simply do not believe that the arts are for them. Working class audiences are turning away from the traditional arts, as they do not see themselves reflected in the programmes developed by the current leadership models. Grayson Perry argues that taste is “inextricably woven into our system of social class”.⁷ His series of tapestries *The Vanity of Small Differences* charts one man’s journey from his working class origins in Sunderland to an upper class destination in the Cotswolds. A man who has changed his class in order to succeed. In each of these pieces, he reflects the taste of the people he met when creating the work, from a variety of different classes. He argues that his work demonstrates that taste is tribal, with each class using taste as a marker or unwritten language within itself to identity them amongst their peers. If this is the case, then if the working classes are not creating work, how can arts taste or content speak to them as peers? There is simply no shared language. Are we expecting our audiences to change their class in order to engage with the performances on our stages and art in our galleries? If not, then why is the pressure on working class cultural and creative workers to engage in social mobility to change their class in order to hold the perceived top jobs in the sector.

So, is social mobility a necessity for success? As an arts leader with strong working class identifiers I have felt increasingly the pressure of perceived social mobility and my own resistance to it. However what is more interesting is that the evidence seems to show that even if I wished to change my class it may not be possible. The *Panic!* report argues that the data clearly shows that the lack of those from working class social origins in the sector is not a new issue, but rather that “there was no golden age for social mobility and equality in cultural occupations”.⁸ In fact, the report shows that there has been an increase in the number of middle and upper class

⁷ Perry, G. *The Telegraph*, 15th June 2013 – <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-features/10117264/Grayson-Perry-Taste-is-woven-into-our-class-system.html>

⁸ Brook, O., O’Brien, D. and Taylor, M. *Panic! 2018: It’s an Arts Emergency*, Barbican, 2018

young people entering the sector between 1981-2011, from 15% to 33%. It should be noted that during this time the number of working class jobs has reduced while the middle class in the UK has grown substantially. However, all this shows is that the working classes in the cultural sector have increasingly been under represented and undervalued by the current structures.

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's change

All the barriers discussed profoundly limit the ability of the working classes to enter the creative sector and thrive within it. Therefore it would seem only logical that the best course of action in order to be a successful arts leader would be to change my class either through social mobility, economic achievement or by adopting the cultural signifiers of the middle and upper classes, leaving my working class origins behind. But changing my class is not the answer and would only serve to maintain the status quo. Rather the arts and cultural sector needs to look at the issue of social class square on, breaking down the barriers of class through proactive interventions that increase the number of working class people who are artists, CEO's and Board members. By breaking down the barriers for those at the start of their cultural journeys, monitoring those within and raising the status of social class as a protected characteristic we can ensure the working classes are represented in all parts of the sector.

During my time at Park Hill, I was keenly aware how important the heritage of the estate was to the future of the gallery; the prioritisation of the artists and the community who would use the gallery is at the heart of the development of the space. Park Hill might be losing its working class image, but S1 Artspace is determined to hold onto Park Hill's working class origins through its programme, mission and values. The opening exhibition *Love Among the Ruins* is a series of photographs and films celebrating and focused on the previous inhabitants of the flats, commemorating the working class culture that has placed Park Hill at the heart of Sheffield's landscape and identity. This experience reminded me of the working class values and passion for creativity that brought me to the sector in the first place. I truly believe that it my origin has been vital to defining my destination, the drive and ambition I have is fuelled by the need for change and the desire to shape an arts and cultural sector that is part of the fabric of all our lives and allows everyone to express, create, enjoy, question and celebrate. My class origin enhances my leadership and although barriers exist by retaining my class I am able to challenge the current perceptions and ideas of meritocracy and social status. Fundamentally, arts leaders need to embrace their origins, and hold onto their values and drivers throughout their careers. Arts leaders should champion their social class, folding our origin story into our leadership narrative can only greater serve us and those we work for and with. By changing our class the destination no longer becomes part of our cultural journey but rather a false start to our leadership. Our leadership can only be truly effective and authentic when all of who we are is present (superhero capes included), and not hidden behind the facade of a mild-mannered version of ourselves.

Clore Leadership cultivates
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South Building
Somerset House, Strand
London WC2R 1LA

00 44 (0) 20 7420 9430
info@cloreleadership.org
cloreleadership.org

TW @cloreleadership
FB /cloreleadership

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