

Hatred and Respect: The Class Shame of Ned ‘Humour’¹

Alex Law

According to the people licensed to talk on our behalf, Scotland suffers from a love of ‘failure’. It celebrates the culture of urban decay and poverty and is apologetic for the anti-social behaviour of knife/drug/wine/gang/hoodie/‘ned’ culture. In policy terms this chimes nicely with New Labour’s ‘Respect’ agenda and the use of publicity spectacles to enforce orderly conduct on unruly young people. In response to accusations in 2005 that the Scottish First Minister, Jack McConnell’s ‘ned crusade’ was failing due to the insufficient issue of anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs) it became necessary to develop a public profile for the crackdown. In February 2005 a £684,000 campaign called ‘Standing up to Anti-Social Behaviour’ was launched by the Scottish Executive.¹ Then, in December 2005, the otherwise unremarkable West Lothian village of Mid-Calder became the first place in the UK to issue a community-wide anti-social behaviour order.² This allows police to disperse any groups of young people found outdoors. If they refuse, they face the threat of an anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) and up to five years in jail. Hence the Scottish Parliament were proud to announce that a ‘record number of 210 ASBOs were granted across Scotland in 2004/05 - the highest figure since their introduction in 1999 and a 42 per cent increase in the number granted in 2003/04’.³

With all the fanfare of a marketing campaign, Blair’s Respect agenda re-defines the terms of the populist value wars as being between the drunken hooliganism of young people and the upright respectability of orderly communities. ‘Respect is about every citizen working together to build a society in which we can respect one another and communities can live in peace together’.⁴ While such right-thinking has won the plaudits of conservative thinkers like Roger Scruton and the right-wing press it presents as a new threat to social order a recognisable problem of much longer vintage – the disreputable urban youth. As the sociologist Richard Sennett put it: ‘Is it any surprise that a politician who elicits less and less respect from his public thinks that the public has a problem with respect’.⁵

Beyond the platitudes of the Respect agenda, another way to exorcise the cultural demon of the urban poor has been to send it up humorously. Humouring the poor was evident in the 1990s with the popular situation comedy *Rab C. Nesbitt* and, in the 2000s, with the sketch show, *Chewin’ the Fat*. In both cases the urban poor were sympathetically drawn, living by their own codes, speaking in their own voices, and outwitting and defying characters representing social and cultural authority. If these portrayals could sometimes be a bit too laudatory they nevertheless demonstrated an insider’s understanding of lives of the urban poor.

But by the mid-2000s these soft insider representations of urban subcultures hardened into hateful, shaming representations of the white

poor and the areas where they live. As ‘chav’ or ned culture, these are the backward subjects of the Respect agenda, their abject whiteness a sign of cultural hopelessness and an embarrassment to the new forward-looking agenda of multicultural neo-liberalism.⁶ As Bev Skeggs argues, “The white trash cultures that signify too authentic and too primitive (or too noisy or too sexual) can be put to work as a source of realistic and fantastical menace to the middle class, as the ‘Chavs’ and ‘hen party’ menace demonstrate”.⁷ Vulgar and exuberance are to be displaced and modernised by a middle class imaginary, itself dazzled by the promise of multicultural consumership in a classless neo-liberal utopia. In this discourse of class-based derision middle class representations of the white urban poor, especially the youth, transform them into an object of hatred and shame.

Shame cultures depend on the external negative attribution of personal disgrace and demand conformity with public judgements about good conduct, dignity and taste. Hence the poor become negatively stereotyped as an undifferentiated, disgraceful, tasteless social group upon whom middle class fears of social disintegration and poverty can be projected and the ideological legacy of ‘whiteness’ can be offloaded. As the geographer Chris Haylett put it, “The contemporary racialisation of the white working class is most apparent in underclass processes which have cast the poorest sections of that group as a group beyond the bounds of ‘the British nation’”.⁸ This process was evident in the 2001 riots in northern English towns where the white working class was depicted as hopelessly racist and backward by a middle class that conspicuously embraces the trappings of multicultural neo-liberalism.

Humour and bigotry

While the new ideology of class-based hate continues an older tradition, most obviously the underclass discourse of the Conservatives in the 1990s, it is now bolstered by humour. This helps to legitimise hateful talk about the poor from counter-attack since it is, after all, ‘only a joke’. But just as Blair’s populist Respect agenda has little to do with mutual respect anti-poor joking represents more than ‘merely’ humour. This appeal to the conventions of humour is an insidious method of licensing hateful discourses against the poor and other oppressed groups. The social psychologist Michael Billig examined the way that appeals to humour is used to justify extreme racist bigotry on Ku Klux Klan-related websites.⁹ Predictably these sites display violently racist humour. But by deploying website disclaimers that it’s all ‘just a joke’ anti-racist objections are somehow thought to be cancelled out. Billig argues that there is a certain pleasure to be had

in humorous displays of hatred, what Sartre called the ‘joy of hating’, whenever it transgresses what is deemed acceptable by established social codes.

Humour allows the bigot the opportunity to displace the symbolic violence of hate discourses by denying that social groups are really the object of hateful laughter at all. Instead, it is the shared recognition of the ‘cleverness’ of the joke format that supposedly generates the opportunity for hilarity. Thus, when challenged the bigot can readily shift their justificatory ground from the hateful content of the joke to the intrinsic social acceptability of humour in the manner of ‘I was only joking’, ‘it’s just a joke’, or ‘take a joke’. Here small, unnoticed words – ‘only’ and ‘just’ – diminish the right to challenge and critique hateful patter.

In other words, it is less how the joke works through its ‘clever’ inner structure than how it is socially and politically situated. By disguising its symbolic violence against the real object of its attack the bigoted joke dissembles and misleads. Class-based bigotry gets coded over in a way that would be disallowed by other types of social communication. Jokes acquire a transcendent quality that puts this special kind of social communication, when it is appropriately signalled to its audience as ‘funny’, as somehow standing outside the bounds of moral or political judgement. In this way the social damage of bigoted joking is both excused and permitted.

‘Ned culture’

This is clearly the case with racist, negative ethnic stereotypes that are otherwise socially taboo and outlawed. In the case of the young, impoverished, white working class the object of attack is a socially marginal group against which there are no public prohibitions on class hate discourses. In fact, venomous rhetoric against precisely this group is the staple of journalists, politicians, and the criminal justice system. In its demonisation of white trash culture, as with much else, the UK is merely catching up with the US.

Public discourse in the UK has been awash recently with denunciations of ‘hooligans’, ‘jobs’, ‘hoodies’ and ‘chavs’. In Scotland (which always has to have its own terms for more general phenomena) this circulates as a vicious discourse of neds. ‘Ned culture’ has become the object of middle class fear and fascination. Seemingly living by their own social codes, neds have dropped out of the respectable, peaceful and hard-working society. Neds lack basic social skills or any kind of a work ethic, and are hell-bent on creating mayhem and misery, especially in the most deprived housing schemes (with ‘schemies’ in some places substituting for neds as the catch-all term). Ned culture is blamed for Scotland’s unenviable crime, rates rather than being seen as a symptom of extreme social polarisation and



inequality. Glasgow, with its long history of gang culture stretching back to the eighteenth century, remains the heartland of ned culture. Despite current fears, a reporter for *The Herald* covering a near fatal stabbing in a gang fight in the Cadder area of Glasgow claims that 'gang trouble is not believed to be any worse now than it was in the past'.¹⁰

Neds are only the most recent manifestation of a historical middle class discourse about the debauched, hooligan sections of the working class. In his celebrated study of 'Wine Alley' in Govan, Sean Damer charts this discourse of class derision from nineteenth century 'paupers' to the 1980s 'underclass', or what local people in Govan in the 1970s called the 'riff-raff' and Glasgow Corporation called 'anti-social tenants'.¹¹ But, as Damer argues, this was never true for all or most people in the impoverished working class or living in the housing scheme itself, just as it's not the case today that a single homogenous object - 'ned culture' - can be blamed as the source of contemporary society's problems.

Today, however, the ned discourse of class derision circulates extensively in the daily rhetoric of the mass media. As it does so it has taken on a more spiteful, hateful character than the almost charmingly romantic portrayals of the recalcitrant poor in *Rab C. Nesbitt* and *Chewin' the Fat*. One example of this is the spoof book, *Nedworld*. Published in 2005, this book satirises 'ned' culture under the pseudonyms 'Kylie Pilrig' and 'Keanu McGlinchy'.¹² It attempts this in the vernacular of the Glaswegian working class but fails to maintain anything like a consistent narrative voice, standing as it does far outside the stereotyped milieu it claims to so humorously depict.

From start to finish a torrent of stereotyped class hatred is unleashed in *Nedworld* that would be legally impossible against any other minority group in the UK. It purports to shed humorous insight into 'the outrageous lifestyle of the ASBO generation'. In fact its clichéd jokes merely repeat the typical race hate jokes so common to British society in the 1970s. Let this one example stand for the hundreds similar in tone and structure:

A ned died pure poor and many local shops donated money to the fund for his funeral out of sympathy. The manager of the jeweller's was asked to donate a fiver. 'Only a fiver?', he asked. 'Only a fiver to bury Brad-Pitt Mackenzie? Here's a cheque. Go and bury one hundred of them.'¹³

Here the reader is invited to share the genocidal desire of the joke teller for the physical elimination of neds in their hundreds. It may be objected that 'it's only a joke' but recall the manner in which hate jokes dissemble in their enmity towards less powerful stereotyped groups. In the case of this joke we are asked to identify with the sentiments of someone speaking from a particular class standpoint, that of a middle class businessman, who we are also to assume has justifiable cause for his homicidal hatred of the 'pure poor' and neds as an entire social group. As Ewan Morrison astutely put it in his review of the book for the *Sunday Herald*, the book is an index of middle-class fears about the underclass [sic]. It had to be written sooner or later and is, in some perverse way, timely. It flies in the face of politically correct ideas about representing the long-term unemployed, the urban poor, the non-educated and delinquent.¹⁴

In contrast to the 'ultimate race hate word', the

N-word, which as Billig notes, "announces hatred without semantic constraint",¹⁵ ned (or 'chav' or whatever local term is used) is a word that can be invoked over and over again because it gives a name to something unmentionable in society: the most impoverished, reviled, humiliated and dominated sections of the working class. As Ewan Morrison further notes in his review of the book, "It dares to say the name, to give the fear a name, more than 2000 times. It exposes not just fear but hatred towards those that carry that name".

'Tinkies' and 'Gadgies' as Dundee Neds

The ned discourse of class derision is mainly targeted at working class male youth in the greater Glasgow region. But the hateful discourse of class derision is not confined to Glasgow or young men. Elsewhere in Scotland, other derogatory terms are used to name the same phenomena. Schemie, tinkie or gadgie are east coast terms, the former referring to living on a housing scheme, while the latter two are derived from terms for impoverished itinerant travellers, typically dispossessed Highlanders or Romanies, peddling cheap goods door to door. 'Tink' is defined by the *Scots Dictionary* as a 'contemptuous terms for a person, specifically a foul-mouthed, vituperative, quarrelsome, vulgar person', though even the *Scots Dictionary* fails to mention poverty as a defining characteristic of the tinkie. That such terms continue to resonate in Scottish society means that they carry the marks of past periods of anti-Highlander and anti-gypsy racism into present day discourses of bigotry.

Tinkie is the term commonly used in Dundee and the surrounding area of Angus. Dundee as a city has struggled against a poor reputation for, on the one hand, the coathiness of the *Sunday Post* and, on the other, being the poorest, most concentrated working class city within Scotland. City planners have actively been trying to discourage negative images of the city and to boost city centre regeneration through education, science and culture.¹⁶ While this provides jobs and consumer distractions for the middle class professionals who commute into the city centre to work and who populate its galleries, theatres and wine bars, the local working class, who have suffered from decades of industrial restructuring and factory closures, are visible only as an army of labourers, appearing to service the affluent before trailing back to the hidden housing schemes dotted around the city's periphery.

However, the young urban poor make their unwanted presence felt in Dundee city centre, hanging around the public and commercial spaces of the city centre, congregating in the shopping centres, bars and clubs, on the street, at

bus stops, and in car parks. They may have little purchasing power but they possess an unwanted visibility. Unusually, where fears of prole-youth are typically reserved for young men, most venom is reserved for young women in Dundee, a city with a reputation for the highest level of teenage pregnancies in Scotland. Just as women formed the combative backbone of the Dundee working class, first in the jute mills and later in the manufacturing factories like Levi's and, most memorably, Timex, so young women remain the object of middle class fears.

Bigotry in 'Dumpdee'

Websites like 'Dumpdee'¹⁷ produce a discursive invective of class, gender and place under the ideological alibi that it's 'just a laugh'. One page contains a spoof news report of an earthquake in Dundee that is able to simultaneously mock the poverty of its 'epicentre' in the housing scheme of Whitfield, promiscuous teenage mothers, endemic criminality, dissolute lifestyles, welfare dependency, squalid environment, and a general lack of cultural taste among the poor:

Victims were seen wandering around aimlessly muttering 'whit the ***k' and 'Whaurd that comfee?' The earthquake decimated the area causing approximately £30.00 worth of damage. Three areas of historic burnt cars were disturbed and many locals were woken before their Giros arrived.

One resident Tracy Sharon Smith a 15yr old mother of five fae Ormiston Crescent said 'It was such a shock, my little Chardonnay Levi-Mercedes came running into the bedroom crying. My youngest two, Tyler Morgan and Megan Chantelle slept through it all, as well as my great granny Lorraine. I was still shaking while I was watching Tricia the next morning'.

Apparently though looting, mugging and car crime did carry on as normal.

And so it goes on in this vein. This has striking parallels with how the black urban poor in New Orleans were callously represented in the aftermath of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and the indifference of a state that openly despises the black urban poor. A page on the site called 'Cheryl's Gadgie Gallery' purports to show photographs of the poor fashion sense of Burberry and tracksuit-clad locals but includes spoof adverts for a toy, a check-clad Furby doll, bearing the legend:

Unlike any Furby seen before, the more you play with it the less it learns! In fact ...it learns nothing.

All thanks to the new 'SCUM' (Socially Crippled Underage Mother-board)

One page depicts a 'birthday card' with a check-clad teenage male surrounded by the claim - 'Congratulations. Your Grandmother is Thirty'. A fear of racial miscegenation among the poor

is also present. In a page of 'minutes' from the 'Dumpdee Gadgie Society' an item on 'Dress codes' is reported from the 'meeting':

How to dress correctly at all times with the latest from the Burberry [sic] collection was given by Chantell Khan-Cohen. (The meeting was then temporarily suspended due to Tayside Police raiding the premises and removing Ms Khan-Cohen and her goods and the 3 models).

The name 'Chantell Khan-Cohen' manages to simultaneously draw upon a fear of Muslims, Jews, and the criminality and bad taste of the poor. This is the wrong end of classless multiculturalism, based as it is on hateful stereotypes rather than the everyday routines of multi-ethnic working class communities.¹⁸

Formal and informal disclaimers

Some attempt is given by the website to respond to criticisms that such material may be seen as offensive. Its homepage has the formal disclaimer of a Legal Notice. This allows the site owners to 'disclaim all liability for such content to the fullest extent permitted by the law'. On the final page there is an informal disclaimer, headed-up by the tell-tale slogan, 'It's just a joke'.

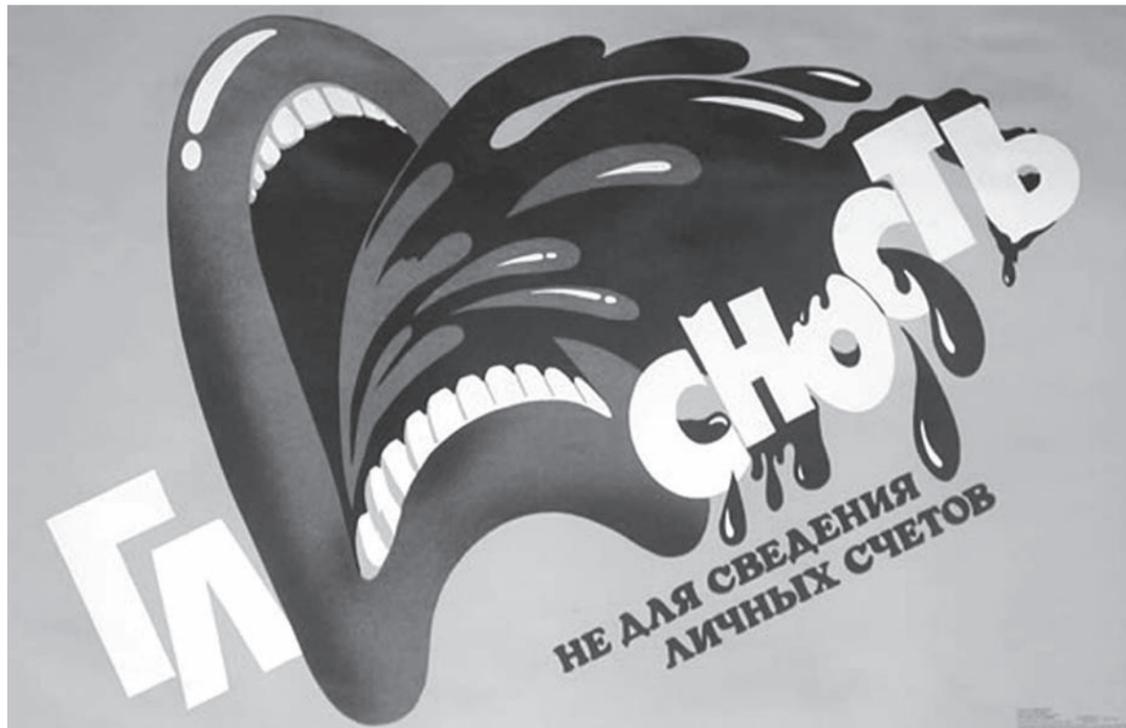
We set up this website in our spare time just for a joke – we had no idea it would become so popular. It's not meant to poke fun at anyone – it's just for amusement and to give everyone a wee laugh – we all need that sometimes.

Is it really the case that 'It's not meant to poke fun at anyone'? This attempt to forestall critique by the use of disclaimers is a typical device in hate humour. Its function is to publicly dissociate the joker from the social or political consequences of the hateful content under the appeal that humour is a special sort of social communication. Yet much of the discursive effort involves attempts to definitively identify and stipulate the characteristic features of the object of attack in terms of promiscuous sexuality, multi-partner teenage mothers, violent criminality, dissolute lifestyles, idleness, squalid environment, and a general lack of cultural taste among the poor, represented, for now, by the ubiquitous Burberry check.

As a further measure of distancing the website from any responsibilities or consequences, it invites 'Fan Mail' supporting the site and 'Hate Mail' criticising it. Peculiarly then the page of 'Hate Mail' is actually from contributors objecting to hate discourse! Much of the Fan Mail is from people who do not live in Dundee but who typically studied at one of the Universities. All agree that it's all just a laugh. However, a few fans are open about deriving vicarious pleasure from hate:

This website is f*****g magic. It just says what the rest of Scotland thinks about Scumdee. You missed out the most important thing to: the Kingsway that gets u pass scumdee without seeing proper gadgies as fast as you can.

Ripping the piss out of the neds/gadgies is in no way glorifying them.



The great tragedy is that natural selection should wipe all the gadgie f*****s out soon enough, but it won't work – cos they breed as soon as they can walk.

This last contributor returns to the genocidal discourse against the poor, only to complain that this solution would also fail, and continues: 'Its funny, its tragic, its all true [sic]'. This appeal to 'its funny' is not here qualified by 'only' but leads on to the claim that this is all somehow 'true', dropping for the moment the usual contrast between 'just a joke' and the more serious business of 'reality'.

Such spurious reasoning puts into relief the more general apologetics for hateful humour – that at some point it refers, if only implicitly, to its social and political context. Discourses of class derision have real effects. They do feed into political, policy and media offensives that look for remedies for social problems in the more general project of multicultural neo-liberalism. The Respect offensive represents discernible class interests repelled by the very social polarisation that it claims to want to overcome. 'In these offensives, poor whites function as ciphers for the offloading of a culturally shameful and burdensome whiteness, whilst the symbolic and material violence of that process, pitched both against class identities and against means of subsistence, remains largely unspoken'.¹⁹ The more explicitly hateful the discourse against the stereotyped Other the more it sanctions the use of draconian powers against the most dominated groups in society, including curfews, exclusions, postcode discrimination, arbitrary policing, punitive laws, the withdrawal of welfare benefits. It is always more than 'just' a joke.

Notes

The argument presented here is part of ongoing work with Gerry Mooney on class, urbanism and neo-liberalism in Scotland and the UK. Some of this will appear in the *Media Education Journal and Critical Social Policy*.

- 1 See <http://www.antisocialbehavioursotland.com>
- 2 Seenan, G. (2005) 'Quiet Village Curbs Its Noisy Youths: Britain's First Blanket Dispersal Order Is Being Enforced In An Unlikely Location', *The Guardian, Society*, December 12
- 3 Scottish Executive News Release, 'Record Number Of Asbos Granted', 2 December 2005, <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/news/releases/2005/12/02100953>
- 4 <http://www.respect.gov.uk/>
- 5 Sennett, R. (2006) 'Views On Respect: Richard Sennett', BBC News Online, 9 January. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4589616.stm>

- 6 Haylett, C. (2001) 'Illegitimate Subjects? Abject Whites, Neo-Liberal Modernisation And Middle-Class Multiculturalism', *Environment And Planning D: Society And Space*, 19.3, pp. 351-370.
- 7 Skeggs, B. (2005) 'The making of class and gender through visualising moral subject formation', *Sociology*, 39.5, December, p. 970.
- 8 Haylett, p. 355.
- 9 Billig, M. (2001) 'Humour And Hatred: The Racist Jokes of The Ku Klux Klan', *Discourse And Society*, 12, pp. 291-313.
- 10 Laing, A. (2006) 'Tragedy Behind Gang War', *The Herald*, 26 January <http://www.theherald.co.uk/news/54999.html>
- 11 Damer, S. (1989) *From Moorepark To Wine Alley: The Rise And Fall Of A Glasgow Housing Scheme*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 136-7.
- 12 Pilrig, K. & McGlinchy, K. (2005) *Nedworld: A Complete Guide To Ned Life And Living*, Black & White Publishing. In the emerging hate genre see also *Little Book Of Neds* and the *Little Book Of Chavs*. The latter sold out its first print run of 100,000, an indication that these cheaply produced texts are also profitable enterprises.
- 13 Pilrig And McGlinchy, p. 64.
- 14 Morrison, E. (2005) 'Heard The One About Brad Pitt McKenzie', *Sunday Herald, Spectrum*, p. 32.
- 15 Billig, p. 278.
- 16 For a recent report of the Dundee city centre 'buzz' see Nathan, M. and Urwin, C. (2006) *City People: City Centre Living in the UK*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research.
- 17 <http://www.dumpdee.co.uk>
- 18 See Back, L. (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture*, London: UCL Press.
- 19 Haylett, p. 366.