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'Them that runs the country don't know what they're doing': Political dissatisfaction

amongst members of the white working class

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"Them that runs the country don't know what they're doing": Political dissatisfaction amongst members of the white working class

Abstract

There are signs that a significant number of British people do not feel that their concerns are being addressed by the mainstream parties or the political system. This paper attends to the quality of that political dissatisfaction amongst members of the white working class. There is a need to extend typical concerns about youth disengagement to adults and to consider the role that class plays. Lower participation in formal democratic processes may not mean disengagement from all forms of politics, but could have considerable consequences for who gains power and for the tone and focus of political debates and policies. Our project contributes to understanding political dissatisfaction by engaging with white working class people in Yorkshire and the North West, where high support for the far-right BNP and low voter turnout are signs that mainstream politics and politicians are failing to impress. We ask people about their feelings in relation to mainstream politics and their concerns. These participants feel distanced from governing elites, formal political processes and old ideologies. They are searching for ways to make sense of their struggles to live a decent life, and in doing so must contend with the dominance of racist discourses.

Key Words: British National Party, class, inequality, politics, political dissatisfaction, racism.

Introduction

Nathan is approaching some builders and Mary is nearby pleading with a couple of local council workers. It's January in Barnsley, it's cold. The council workers are not interested in being interviewed about British politics. One of them says he doesn't need to be interviewed, he can tell her what he thinks at once: "them that runs the country don't know what they're doing". Nathan gets a 'no' from the construction workers too. This is a fairly common response to our recruiting attempts. Despite being reassured that we want to talk to people who are not interested in politics, many people still say they do not want to talk about it. Over the following weeks we do manage to convince some people to be interviewed in Barnsley and others in Burnley, Doncaster and Hull. Most of these white working class people describe themselves as not very interested in politics. They seem fed up with the status quo and have little expectation that the upcoming 2010 general election will bring any kind of significant change. These are not a representative sample of working class voters, however talking to them helps paint a more nuanced picture of political dissatisfaction. We do not have space to deal with the considerable debate about the nature of the contemporary working class/es (see Cannadine, 1998; Skeggs, 2004), but it seems clear that the people we spoke to experience class disadvantage in that most have relatively low levels of education, do semi-skilled and manual work and most importantly: earn low wages. It is important to know why they might feel alienated from mainstream politics.

We ended up in Barnsley on a cold day in January because we were concerned about the electoral success of the far-right British National Party (BNP) in the 2009 European

parliamentary elections. When the BNP won two seats: Yorkshire and Humber and the North West, it raised questions about growing disillusionment with the political mainstream. They got 8 to 10 per cent of the vote in these areas, compared to 6 per cent nationwide and these are the major areas of success for the BNP outside of the East End of London (Electoral Commission, 2010). Success at the EU level followed on the back of some local government successes in these places (Deacon *et al.*, 2004; Electoral Commission, 2010; Goodwin, 2008; Margetts *et al.,* 2004; Rhodes, 2009: 23-24). The BNP have benefited from low voter turnout, which highlights that many people are disengaged from mainstream politics (Chappell *et al.,* 2010). In the EU seats they won, fewer people voted for them in 2009 than in 2004 but a drop in turnout (32 per cent compared to 42 per cent in 2004) delivered the win (Electoral Commission, 2010). Low turnout has also been key in BNP success at the local level (Rhodes, 2009: 26). There have been explanations of the BNP's successes and although turnout is central, clearly a range of factors are involved such as convergence in the other parties, the BNP's 'modernisation' and external factors such as deindustrialisation (e.g. Chappell *et al.*, 2010; Copsey, 2004; 2007; Ford and Goodwin, 2010; Goodwin,2007; 2008; Renton, 2003; Rhodes, 2009). However, there has been little discussion of what their 'success' might indicate about political dissatisfaction. The BNP was unable to translate its previous gains and a small increase in vote share into success in the general election in 2010 and indeed lost ground in the simultaneous local elections. In both cases turnout was much higher than for the elections they won (BBC, 2010a; b). Higher turnout highlights the relatively small scale of their support, but their success is one example of how disengagement from mainstream politics is of serious concern for maintaining a democracy based on tolerance and diversity. In order to examine

political dissatisfaction we thus decided to talk to people who share the same characteristics as BNP voters in areas of Yorkshire and the North East where support for them is relatively high and turnout fairly low. These areas are predominantly working class in that they have high levels of deprivation and are populated mainly by people in semi-skilled and manual occupations, with lower levels of education, earning low wages (see below). Much of the concern about BNP support is directed at the white working class (Sveinsson, 2009) even though not all BNP supporters are working class (YouGov, 2009). Our study can help consider whether this concern is warranted, but we begin by taking high levels of BNP support and low turnout to be important indicators of dissatisfaction with mainstream politics.

We examine current debates about political dissatisfaction and its relative neglect within sociology. Possible explanations for this neglect are considered and an argument mounted about what sociology might contribute to understanding dissatisfaction with politics, especially as it relates to class disadvantage and discourses around racism. We further illustrate this using our qualitative study on how white working class people in Yorkshire and the North West feel about mainstream politics. Their dissatisfaction centred around feeling distanced from mainstream politics and politicians, and a lack of attention to issues of everyday concern to working class (and indeed other) voters. Meanwhile the dominance of racist discourses around immigration leaves white working class people with few other resources to speak of their primary interests in alleviating socio-economic disadvantage and divides them from their non-white neighbours who share those interests.

Political dissatisfaction: Not just for young people

For over a decade, academics, journalists and governments alike have pointed to low youth voter turnout rates as symptomatic of a generation of young people who maintain little engagement with the public sphere and show few signs of re-connecting. Concern about young people's apparent apathy and disengagement from politics can be seen in the academy (Bhavnani, 1991; Mellor, 1998; Mellor *et al.,* 2002; Vromen, 1995; 2003), the media (Coulton, 2004; Jennings, 2001; Sluggett, 2006), and governments (Eckeresley, 1988; Edwards *et al.,* 2006; Electoral Commission, 2002; Jeffery, 2005; POWER Inquiry, 2006; Print *et al.,* 2004; 2005; Saha *et al.,* 2007; SSCEET, 1989). Debates about young people's apparent disengagement from politics continue (e.g. Bulbeck and Harris, 2007; Edwards, 2007; Henn *et al.,* 2002; Author reference; Marsh *et al.,* 2007), but concern over young people's apparent disengagement from mainstream politics may have masked a wider problem of general adult dissatisfaction with mainstream politics (see Hay, 2007: 11-27; Power Inquiry, 2006)

The media have paid some attention to declining rates of participation (Rawnsley 2009), but these forays are not sustained, typically appearing as an election looms. Furthermore, the focus tends to be short-term, on the politics of the day and the effect of contemporary political dynamics on participation and engagement.

Recently, political scientists have fore grounded political factors in the analysis of declining adult participation and disaffection with politics. Hay (2007) argues that politicians have embraced and appropriated the tenets of rational choice theory resulting in a series of de-politicisation processes which have reduced the sphere of the political and portrayed politicians as ill-suited to address the key problems of the day. In a similar vein, Stoker's recent work (2006) argues that amidst the complexities of globalisation and technological change, politicians are unable to deliver. Like others (e.g. Bauman, 1999), Stoker draws our attention to the corrosive effect of the marketisation of political competition; positioned as consumers of politics we will inevitably feel unfulfilled by the typically messy and compromised public goods which collective decision-making delivers. These explanations have some merit but offer an incomplete account of declining interest in politics.

Following disciplinary boundaries sociology has often overlooked individual political participation and left it to political scientists to scrutinise. Instead, political sociology has until very recently, focused at the level of the nation state and resistance to its power in the form of social movements. This top down view of power has been criticised and displaced by the cultural, global and complexity turns in sociology (Taylor, 2010), but with still limited attention to individual engagement with major party politics. Yet sociology has a wealth of theoretical and methodological tools pertinent to a nuanced understanding of people's relationship with mainstream politics and the political generally.

Where sociology has made some contribution to understanding the contemporary dynamics of mainstream political participation is in discussions about civil society and class inequalities. The concept of social capital has been central in these discussions, especially

For him, declining political participation is but a symptom of the much broader decline and breakdown of social capital – the bonds which connect and bind communities together. The disintegration of communities and the concurrent erosion of notions of civic duty and virtue have rendered citizens atomized and dislocated from each other and disengaged from politics. The implication is that working class communities have become especially disengaged and there is some evidence of this (see Pattie *et al.* 2003). However, Putnam's declining social capital thesis has been criticised on a number of fronts (e.g. Newton, 1999; Norris, 1996). We decided not to draw upon social capital for several reasons. Firstly, as a concept, social capital is definitionally gargantuan and chaotic (Fine 2010). Secondly, social capital typically ignores the play of power in social life (Navarro 2002). Thirdly, the declining social capital thesis lays the blame for inept communities and declining participation squarely at the feet of citizens. The finger is pointed at their failures of character with little regard for the impact of broader social processes. Finally, and flowing from the previous point, Putnam's rendering of human agents is too passive and does not provide enough scope for people to make and remake their social worlds, including their understandings of politics and forms of participation.

Another body of work reads the decline in formal political participation quite differently, arguing that socio-cultural changes have created less deferential and more discerning and critical citizens (e.g. Norris, 1999; 2002; Power Inquiry, 2006). Pippa Norris's work is useful here in highlighting the critical role citizens can play and new forms of participation and targets for political action. Significantly, some working in this area have elaborated on

the important difference between apathy and cynicism, stressing the engagement and critique required by a cynical stance (see for example, Author reference; Bhavnani, 1991; Harris, 2001; Marsh *et al.*, 2007). However, the critical citizens we spoke to are not the younger, better educated and better politically informed citizens of Norris's work. In contrast, most of our participants are less educated and were more concerned with a materialist rather than a post-material politics. These accounts are more optimistic and do not regard citizens as apathetic; but how and why citizens are critical of mainstream politics remains under-elaborated.

While the interpretations of declining rates of formal political participation vary, they all lack a precise analysis of the *quality* of voter dissatisfaction. Our study deployed qualitative methods in a field of inquiry dominated by quantitative approaches. We were conceptually attuned to the engagement and critique inherent in cynical – but disengaged – stances towards mainstream politics. Such an approach allowed us to listen to how participants' dissatisfaction related to everyday socio-economic concerns and the challenges of being at the blunt end of processes of globalisation. We were also able to hear the ways in which racist discourse was sometimes used to explain such social disadvantage.

We argue that our participants feel dissatisfied with mainstream politics principally because it fails to address their concerns. The political system itself is seen as wanting, with First Past the Post elections every five years being seen as offering little participation and wasting votes (Goodwin, 2008; Margetts *et al.,* 2004). Significantly, political disaffection has often become 'articulated in terms of race' (Rhodes, 2009: 25). Racist discourses have

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warped the tenets of multiculturalism to serve claims that white people were being 'left behind' (see Atton, 2006; McGhee, 2008). This racialisation of the white working class pits a black 'them' against a white 'us' in a partly imagined battle over jobs and resources and this divide and conquer strategy has become the dominant way of explaining white working class disadvantage. Labour ceased to offer an ideological alternative and became seen as complacent in their Northern 'heartlands', where they were perceived as not listening and as having failed to alleviate deprivations (National Inequality Panel, 2010; Rhodes, 2009: 28). Opposition parties were also culpable in that they were almost absent, although memories of Thatcher has kept many working class Northerners from voting Tory (Rhodes, 2009: 31). Meanwhile multiculturalism promoted attention to the way in which poverty was disproportionately located within ethnic minority communities, but attempts to redress this began to be perceived as an 'unfair' division of scarce local resources (Rhodes, 2009). As Kundnani (2001: 108) puts it: 'The poor and the still poorer fought over the scraps of the paltry regeneration monies that the government made available to keep them quiet'. Concerns about poverty and material struggles to lead a decent life are evident amongst our interviewees and can be firmly located in the context of dissatisfaction with mainstream politics. The following section begins with a discussion of our methods before exploring the study's findings.

Political dissatisfaction amongst members of the white working class

Space permits only a brief outline of our qualitative study of 12 white working class participants in Yorkshire and the North West, prior to the 2010 general election. Following

results from the YouGov (2009) poll, our sample was purposefully constructed to reflect

those groups with highest support for the BNP, although none of the participants were BNP

voters. We sampled for skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers as it was

expected that income and education would follow occupation. While the sample is

relatively small our findings are borne out in recent quantitative research (Chappell *et al.,*

2010). We conducted semi-structured interviews with white, working class people from

areas of high BNP support and where turnout was relatively low (Barnsley, Burnley,

Doncaster, Hull). Barnsley in South Yorkshire showed the highest level of support for the

party nationwide in the 2009 EU elections at around 17 per cent (up from 8 per cent from

2004). In Doncaster the BNP took about 12 per cent of the vote, also up from 8 per cent in

2004. Meanwhile Kingston upon Hull was more average with 10 per cent of the vote going

to the BNP in 2009 (up from 8.5 per cent in 2004), but notable for having the lowest

turnout in the UK for those 2009 elections at around 20 per cent (Mellows-Facer *et al.,*

2004; 2009). All these towns have struggled economically over the last few decades.

Burnley, saw its textile manufactures disappear in the later twentieth century with little to

replace them. By 2004 one quarter of residents lived in areas classified as some of the most

deprived in Britain (Deacon *et al.,* 2004; Goodwin, 2008: 352; Rhodes, 2009: 28). Barnsley

and Doncaster were hard hit by the pit closures of the 1970s and 1980s and the miners'

strike. Recovery has been limited. Barnsley was particularly reliant on coal, and is only

now developing a service economy, with unemployment dropping to around the national

average. Doncaster fared better because its good communication and transport links made it

attractive as a location for distribution warehouses. Hull suffered when the fishing industry

declined from the mid 1970s and in 2007 it had the 14th highest unemployment rate in

Britain at around 8 per cent. These all remain low wage areas and household incomes in Yorkshire and the Humber are the second lowest in Britain after the North East (which includes Burnley) (Batty and Hilton, 2003: 166-7; Beale and Adcock, 2007; Barnsley.gov.uk, 2010; Hull City Council, 2010; Office of National Statistics, 2009). Participants were recruited via cold canvassing in the towns selected. We went into pubs, cafes, hairdressers, recruitment firms and industrial estates to ask people to participate. We also telephoned plumbers, electricians, secretaries and couriers. Most of our sample were recruited this way, with a few then being referred to us by participants. Table One shows some of the demographic characteristics of the sample, which closely matches the YouGov (2009: 14-15; and above) sample of BNP voters.

Table 1 Summary of study participants

Name	Age group	Occupation	Income p.a.	Education
Amy[ii]	18-34	Hairdresser	≤ £10,000	High school/NVQ3
Andrew	18-34	Administrator	£10-19,999	Undergraduate degree
Doreen	55 +	Retired nurse	£10-19,999	3 yrs nursing college
Elizabeth	55 +	Courier	£20 – 29,999	O levels
Jane	34-54	Hairdresser	£10-19,999	High school/NVQ
John	55 +	Warehouse Assistant	£10-19,999	O levels

Josh	18-34	Bar worker (supervisor)	£10-19,999	Trade certificate
Katie	18-34	Waitress	≤ £10,000	Undergraduate degree
Mark	18-34	Waiter	≤ £10,000	Undergraduate degree
Mick	18-34	Cook	£10-19,999	O-Levels (was studying for A-Levels)
Richard	55 +	Accountant	£20- 29,999	High school
Tom	35-54	Waiter	≤ £10,000	Undergraduate degree

This is a broadly working class sample, and certainly a low-wage sample. Note that the self-identified 'accountant' has no education beyond high school and keeps the books for a trade supply firm on an industrial estate. He and the courier are the only ones to earn over £20,000, though not over £30,000, which is about the national average. Four of the sample have undergraduate degrees, but as far as we could ascertain they are all from working class families and evidently they are working in low wage jobs, most semi-skilled or manual occupations.

As interviewers, being white Anitpodeans was useful: both because people often provided more detail to 'fill us in' on British politics and because it helped highlight what people mean when they talk about immigration. Yet, the irony of a couple of white foreigners from the developed world listening to stories about resource greedy immigrants is apparent to us. It was clear that participants do not usually include us in the 'problem' of immigration,

despite the fact that there are more of 'us' (from developed countries) entering Britain than there are asylum seekers (Back *et al.*, 2002: 4.10). Our apparently non-threatening and familiar forms of otherness gives us a unique ability to put participants at ease, probably more so than if we were middle class British academics. Our being both white and English speaking appears to make participants feel that they can discuss their reservations about non-white and non-English speaking immigrants (ie. Poles). We fit into the 'us' category in this 'kith and kin' racism (Kundnani, 2001), whether we like it or not. These are issues to be discussed in another paper, but they can help clarify at what point concerns about immigration are racist. However, immigration is not the sole, or even major concern of most of the voters to whom we spoke. Those concerns need to be discussed within the context of a general dissatisfaction with mainstream politics.

In listening to what our participants say about their political dissatisfaction, we are not searching for some underlying truth, but are interested in how they account for it. Overall, we aim 'to reveal aspects of people's political outlooks that are barely visible to quantitative measures by showing people thinking about the society they live in with the resources they have available' (Brett and Moran, 2006: 4). Our participants often say they "don't really understand much" about politics but all have things to say about "the average Joe" or "ordinary people" and how they "struggle from day to day". Interviewees do not appear to just say what they think is socially acceptable. One indication of this is the prefacing of what they think might be less acceptable with phrases like "I'm not racist but" or "don't get me wrong". There are also external indicators that however they account for

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their dissatisfaction they belong to a social group who suffer the disadvantages of earning a low wage and have lower levels of political participation (Pattie *et al.,* 2003).

Dissatisfaction with politics is not about apathy, but revealed in a variety of critical stances. While a few participants were clearly very interested and engaged with mainstream politics (for example, Richard, Mick, and Andrew) most voiced cynicism and criticisms of politics and politicians. The criticisms ranged from party convergence to wholesale critique of mainstream politics.

> Katie: Because, obviously, you probably know about Doncaster, it's quite a Labour stronghold. And you're like, well, what difference is it [my vote] really going to make then?

Katie wonders what difference her vote will make in a 'Labour stronghold', indicating that the first past the post system can make people feel that where one party has a large majority the individual has no influence (see Lodge and Gottfried 2011: 17). Parties and their candidates will not usually make much effort to win over voters in weak areas.

John from Burnley makes criticisms of politics centred on how living in a strong Labour electorate means a lack of real choice of candidates. He thinks he would 'probably of still been Conservative if [he] lived down [South], but here you never see any of them, they don't knock on [his] door…. They can't be bothered'. Later, John also notes that he's 'never seen a Conservative candidate in this area' over the three decades he has lived in

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Burnley. This appears to have caused his disinterest and he says, 'I mean, you've got two candidates locally, and you know but er [pause] I'm not interested in either of 'em.' ==Here the issue is not so much feeling that his vote does not count, but that the party he prefers 'can't be bothered' to check on his support when they know they cannot win in Burnley. Others are not sure that a different party would bring change.==

Richard, also from Burnley, ==is critical of== the lack of difference between political parties and their convergence on the centre of the political spectrum:

> Richard: Quite how people see the Liberal Democrats I'm not really sure, cos they're not. A lot of people do vote for them now, but to be honest I'm not exactly sure how their policies differ from either the Labour Party or the Conservative Party. But the Labour Party and the moment I wouldn't describe as very left wing really, so [pause]. Under like this New Labour idea of Tony Blair's: no commitment to social to what socialism or nationalisation, which meant they're fairly middle of the road really.

==For Richard, the Liberal Party are hard to differentiate from Labour and the Conservatives and New Labour are 'middle of the road', meaning there is little to choose from ideologically. He nevertheless remains "quite interested" in the upcoming election and thinks there will be a "sea change", a shift away from Labour.==

Mick who is in his mid-20s and from Doncaster, is also interested and engaged with politics, but he conveys a high level of cynicism when he describes party manifestoes as 'lies' used by parties to win votes.

Others made cynical comments about a system they did not trust and felt little desire to be involved with, as Josh suggests when asked how he feels about politics:

> Josh: I've gotta – to be totally honest, I don't really understand much um, and with what does happen, you read about it, you hear about it on the news or whatever, it doesn't give me much faith or interest in wanting to get to know much about it.

> Author 2: Yeah. So would you say that you're generally not very interested in politics?

> Josh: I'd like to be, em, but like I say it's just so negative all the time. The different things you're hearin' especially lately with the expenses [MPs' expenses scandal]. Just the whole politics world and everything surrounding politics and the people involved in politics, I just think it's quite dark.

This 'negative' and 'dark' portrayal of politics is one that suggests politicians are not to be trusted (for example they exploit expense accounts) and this makes Josh lose 'faith' and feel disinterested, even though he would like to be more interested. Katie from Doncaster similarly says she's not interested because:

To be truthful, I think a lot of it, that you get told is a load of crap to be truthful –

they're making all these promises, don't keep up to them. And it's like well, how

much interest can you have in someone that just feeds you lies all the time.

Katie, like Josh, explains her disinterest as a result of feeling she is being fed lies by

politicians. Most of the participants express this lack of trust, but some are critical not just

of 'lying' politicians.

Tom, who is in his mid-30s and lives near Burnley, does not trust politicians and also has

little faith in the political system:

I tend not to er, actively follow politics – you know, if I hear something or read

something I'll take it in. ... I feel that the original idea of politics and government

isn't kept to – in fact, we're very far away from it. The original idea is, you know,

you have a village or a town and people bickering over what's best for the town. So

therefore you, you know, elect someone to speak for the people and to make

decisions on the majority. Um, and I don't believe that that happens today. Um, for

instance, I think, was it Gordon Brown, didn't he, just kind of, you know, get

straight in to being Prime Minister, wasn't voted in. That kind of thing. So it's like,

well, 'how does that work?' Isn't that cheating [laughs]? Ah, that for like, you know

the biggest position in the country, so if that's done right in front of your eyes then,

surely from the top down is – not necessarily corrupt, but not keeping to the original

idea of what politics is there for. It's supposed to be helping people. ... It all just

seems irrelevant really, irrelevant to my life, because whatever I think or feel,

they'll go ahead and make their own decisions anyway [smiles]. And I think a lot of

the people feel like that.

This fairly complex set of criticisms centres around his feeling that politics has moved

away from 'the original idea' of a more participatory politics with 'people bickering over

what's best for the town' and 'helping people'. Instead he thinks it has become 'top down'

and 'irrelevant' to his life.

Such feelings of disjuncture between politics and everyday lives was a criticism other

participants offered as an explanation for their disengagement. In John's words:

I tar em all with the same brush. The man whose in, they never seem to do, I mean

they just all take money off you and er I mean they're never at work helping me,

they take a third of me wage but they're not there lifting when I want them and uh.

You know, we don't seem to get an awful lot for what we pay in.

Here John wryly suggests that

Elizabeth from Hull articulates this distance by describing politics as in a bubble:

My view is they're in government, they're in power, they're in Downing street, and

they're in this bubble of power, shall we say. And they'll do things and we'll be

referred to as 'the people', you know. But it's not, it's not, 'the people' is *just a*

phrase. And I don't think. Everything's too big and there's too many issues going

on. I think that the majority of people in this country just get on with what they're

doing in their own little world and just get on with it. Because, what else can they

do? And it's when you have to come up against officialdom in some capacity then

you have to sort of battle through the system.

Elizabeth concedes it must be difficult for politicians to remain in touch with the public,

'...they get into to govern bubble, with civil servants and policy making ... it can't be easy

to try and keep a perspective of Mr Joe Bloggs living, you know, living in Hull.' She

positions the world of politics and everyday life as largely separate spheres which intersect

periodically. Talking about the election she says:

Most of us will just muddle along, won't we. We'll muddle along, we'll be in our

own small worlds, trying, battling on to make a living, and the government people

will just get on doing what they done and at some point the two will meet, we'll get,

we'll get affected by the policies they put in. Whether fuel comes down in price

remains to be seen [laughter].

While some of these participants may not be actively engaged – some did not vote or only

voted occasionally – it is clear that any lack of participation does not result from sheer

apathy. Katie, Josh, and Tom claimed they knew little about politics but they know and feel

enough to mount strong arguments for why they do not bother participating. Like studies of

young people and politics (e.g. author reference; Marsh *et al.,* 2007) a qualitative approach

allows us to go beyond types of participation and explore the reasons for (dis)engagement. This works to separate out apathy and its association with indifference from a cynicism with elements of critical engagement.

It is unclear whether our participants are the kind of critical citizens that Norris (2002) suggests, although many are critical of mainstream politics and trying to find an analysis of class disadvantage. This is difficult within an ideological climate that provides few resources for such an analysis. New Labour have abdicated their role of providing rhetoric for those struggling to get by economically. Other voices on the left have been marginalised as socialists touting yesterday's news of a communist system thought to have failed (see Fukuyama, 1992). Instead, many draw on the loudly shouted tabloid headlines and indeed what politicians themselves say. The explanation most readily to hand for white working class disadvantage is that 'illegal' immigrants and asylum seekers are taking 'their' jobs and 'their' money. This is an explanation particularly dear to the British National Party but also part of widespread new racist discourses circulated by state institutions, politicians and the press (Kundnani, 2007; 2001). Unsurprisingly 'ordinary' people (see Billig, 1995; Brett and Moran, 2006) also make use of these discourses and not always by telling 'context-dependent stories about asylum seekers' (Millington, 2010: 375). As Amy, a 25 year old hairdresser in Doncaster says in answer to our question about what she would like politicians to do:

> I don't really know, I think more obviously helping other people out and they say they're gonna do it. You know helping their own out, not others. Us that need it. … See I don't know, cos I don't know if it's what they can, what I'm thinking, maybe

but maybe you know, other people abroad, well not abroad, but do you know. It might sound a bit racist but stopping others coming in, you know, and taking our, and I'm not a racist person but they make me want to be when they get all the help and we don't.

Very little is done to counter the myths that circulate about 'immigrants' getting more benefits, better accommodation and so on (Kundnani, 2007; 2001). Meanwhile there appears to be a strong sense of politicians failing to deliver to improve the lives of the 'ordinary' person. This engenders dissatisfaction with politics.

Those we interviewed are probably more engaged than those so disinterested that they did not wish to speak to us about politics. However, many are quite disengaged. Several of the participants rarely vote and one appeared unsure which party was in Government and who was Prime Minister. It may be that the interviewees are perhaps also those with more liberal views that they think might be acceptable to a couple of academics. However, they appeared honest in their willingness to tell us their not always so liberal opinions. If they are towards the liberal end of the scale they still have things to tell us about dissatisfaction with politics. For instance, although the interviewees are in the same income, occupational and educational brackets as BNP voters in the YouGov sample, none expressed support for or interest in the BNP. In fact, most of the working class people we spoke to expressed a lack of interest in the BNP, or, like Richard found them 'distasteful'. Most of the younger people were not impressed by the BNP. Mick in Doncaster thought the BNP 'played on people's fears, much like Hitler did when he came to power'. Lower levels of education

and a working class position does not mean automatic support for the BNP, and the racism expressed is not confined to the working classes but fits with the discourses of state racism and tabloid journalism currently dominant (cf. Billig, 1995; Kundnani, 2007; 2001).

We have no wish to be apologists for racism, but the way in which these participants spoke about issues of 'race' was not always straightforward. For example, retired nurse Doreen in Barnsley thought 'illegal immigrants' were a major problem and displayed 'unease' (Fortier 2010) about the increased numbers of non-white people in Barnsley. However, she spontaneously referred[iii] to Nick Griffin as 'that BNP dickhead' and thought that all he did was 'incite riots'. Meanwhile, an older man in Burnley, who only got his O-levels in the last few years, offered an analysis of British colonial exploitation that the authors have seldom heard from our more privileged undergraduate students:

> John: What they're saying [the BNP] is what a lot of people think, but they are just too far-right, too extreme. I mean we fought two, well I mean we fought the last war for, against that sort of thing, you know. Everybody has a right to live don't they? You know, it's not they're fault that they're here, it's our fault. We raped and pillaged their country, didn't we? I mean you know back in from 1700 or something, you know, we took all the minerals and wealth out that, for that they give a load of British passports out.

Talk about immigration is typically racist, but almost always in the context of trying to explain (white) working class disadvantage. John still has considerable concerns about immigration and they fit with the all too common current discourses about 'them' taking

'our' money (Kundnani, 2001). Usually this is directed at Asian and other immigrants, although Andrew in Doncaster identifies the problem as:

> the way that employers can get other people in, particularly from other countries, like Australia, New Zealand, the States, Canada. They can get people in from the Commonwealth countries as well, to do the higher level jobs that perhaps we'd have in the past been trained up to do. And they're coming in straight above all the people that would've gone up the ladder, so it's stopping people coming from on the bottom rungs of the ladder getting up that little bit further. It's stopping them from improving.

However, we argue that this concern with immigration is not actually about competition over scarce resources but about a lack of other ways in which to talk about disadvantage and being at the blunt end of processes of globalisation.

When asked what the important problems were that politicians should be addressing, a small minority of the participants mentioned immigration first, most mentioned socio-economic concerns. John for example said 'poverty'. Before mentioning the problem of 'people from other countries' above, Andrew in Doncaster said the problem politicians should be dealing with is the 'basic standard of life, the people on the lowest income who still work full time, who are the ones who prop up the economy'. He continues:

The minimum wage is becoming the maximum wage now and there's very little movement at the bottom with regards to wages and things, it's really people who are on a wage a little bit above, not really, there's no really extra money for people who have got a brain, who can perhaps progress a bit, there's very much that sort of thing, they're very much paid the same as factory workers or anybody else … there's not real incentive for the brains anymore. … This social mobility thing is worse now than it ever was.

Below, Katie discusses the problems with making ends meet on their low incomes (see Table 1), even though she is doing the 'right' things.

I can understand why so many people, like, if you have children and stuff, don't bother going back into work. I mean, especially like with the benefits system and stuff like that because. What I mean – an example is one of the nurses that dad works with. She worked out that erm, by staying off work and looking after her own child, and the money that she'd received for not working, she'd only be £10 worse off than she would have been **by going back to work**, yet she would have been missing out on the child growing up, sort of thing. So, it's bad that when somebody's a nurse and it's nurses that we need and stuff like that that there isn't enough incentive for them to return to their work because the wages just aren't good enough for them. … the wages should be there to sort of make up for it a bit more because we need these people to, well, help really run the country a lot more – I mean, what do you do if there's no nurses because it's not worth them going to

work and no doctors because it's not worth them going to work? And the example about the army and stuff like that, the amount they get for putting their lives on the line is absolutely pathetic, and I mean what is it they get if they come back from war, about £3,000 – oh, congratulations, you're actually alive [laughs]. You know what I mean, it's like. [pause] It's pitiful wages for people that are really putting their lives on the line and…I just don't think it's enough. I can understand people having like, little run-of-the-mill sort of jobs and everything, but *even then* I mean the amount that it costs for people to get to work and stuff like that; you spend a huge chunk of your wages just trying to get to your job *and is it even worth working* sometimes? Because, I mean I, I know like if I'm on a morning shift here [her workplace] I only earn £6.05 an hour, but for me to get to work there's, there's no buses that'd get me in early enough. I have to spend like 4 pound on a taxi and I just think, well that's cost me like, an hour to earn *that*. So, for a lot of people it's like, where's the incentive in working to keep the country, like, the country going?

These comments about the difficulties of making ends meet on low incomes were echoed by all participants.

The fact that politics fails to address these key concerns is no doubt at the heart of our participants' dissatisfaction, but it does not mean that they hate politics (c.f. Hay, 2007) Hate would involve more investment of emotion than they think worthwhile given their sense of the distance from and disillusionment with mainstream politics. They are uninterested and it gives them little hope.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to explain political dissatisfaction amongst some of the white working class. It extends discussions of political dissatisfaction beyond their usual focus on young people's supposed political disengagement, to attend to low political participation amongst adults. We question those few scholars who attempt to explain adult disengagement by applying theories of social capital in ways that put the blame for low participation on 'apathetic' citizens and dysfunctional communities. Our account coincides with Pippa Norris's to the extent that it recognizes citizens as active in employing criticisms of mainstream politics. However, the critical citizens we spoke to are less like Norris's, in that they were working class, less educated and more concerned with a materialist rather than post-material politics. Within such a climate of critical disengagement and given the context of economic decline and demographic change in the Northern towns in this study, a range of parties, newspapers and government policies have had some 'success' in racialising white working class disadvantage. This has tended to split many poor communities along ethnic lines. The BNP are not the only ones making political use of this way of explaining white working class people's socio-economic struggles and no real alternatives are available. While the sample is relatively small, our results are borne out in recent quantitative (Chappell et al., 2010) research and add much needed depth and nuance to the understanding of political dissatisfaction.

Many people appear not to hate politics but feel that it is of little relevance for everyday life. The working class people we spoke to regard the political system and politicians as distant from their socio-economic struggles. The political system, its voting methods and structure around centre-tending parties are criticised. Participants lack trust in politicians and feel that politics has been corrupted. For these white working class people mainstream politics gives little apparent vocal or actual attention to their daily struggles. Global economic shifts and their related social and ideological consequences have left semi and unskilled workers particularly vulnerable within Britain's deindustrialised low-wage areas. The resulting frustrations within the white working classes have been fuelled by a new racism allied in complex ways to 'unease' (Fortier 2010) in dealing with cultural difference 'on the doorstep'. White working class people are trying to make sense of their struggles and some turn to the racist discourses blaming immigrants because few other resources are available. This does not mean that they are somehow more racist than other social groups, and indeed our participants generally found the 'extreme' racist policies of the BNP distasteful. State institutions, governmental agencies, politicians and major parties have all exploited 'the problem of immigration' as a scapegoat for failures to address socio-economic deprivations. It seems vital that sociologists participate in debates around political dissatisfaction and immigration so that any relationship between these and socio-economic disadvantage across ethnic groups can be better understood. This can help to build a politics capable of engaging with the concerns of all working class people.

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[ii]   All participants' names have been changed.

[iii]   She brought this up when talking about something else, not in response to later questions about what she thought of minor parties and their leaders.