Prospects for working-class creatives no better or worse today than in 1960s, says research

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Leading actors are right in warning that the U.K. arts have become increasingly dominated by privately educated, middle-class elite, but wrong about the reason for this, new research says.

There are fewer people from working-class backgrounds entering creative work today because there are fewer people from working-class backgrounds in society, and not because their career path is harder, as Michael Sheen and Christopher Eccleston, among others, have feared.

The study found that the prospects for aspiring working-class actors, musicians and writers have always been poor and they are no better or worse than they were in the 1970s, the so-called "golden age" of social mobility.

Four researchers analyzed the results of the Office for National Statistics Longitudinal Study dataset of almost 250,000 people born between 1953 and 1992, of whom 5,300 were working as artists, musicians or in the media, advertising, museums and publishing.

The four are Dr. Orian Brook, of the University of Edinburgh, Professor Andrew Miles, University of Manchester, and Professor Dave O'Brien and Dr. Mark Taylor, University of Sheffield.

They compared people born in the four decades from 1953 to 1992, looking at the social class of the families that they were brought up in, and whether they went on to work in a creative job.

They found that 16% of the older cohort of creative workers were from working-class backgrounds, falling to 8% in the youngest cohort. The figures for those from a higher professional background working in creative jobs doubled, from 12% to 24%, when comparing the earliest and latest cohorts.
When they adjusted the statistics to compare people of similar ethnicity, location and gender they found that, overall, people who grew up in professional families were four times more likely than those with working-class parents to be in creative work.

However, the research found that these changes correlated with a general expansion of the middle-class and fall in the proportion of the working-class in Britain, with a doubling of the proportion of young people whose parents were higher professionals, from 7% to 16%, and fall in the proportion of young people from working-class households, from 37% to 21%.

In an article published in the journal *Sociology*, the researchers say, "Cultural and creative occupations are not, and have never been, exceptionally open, with access to core creative jobs by class background remaining consistently unequal since the 1970s.

"The chances of getting into creative work are profoundly unequal in class terms, but they are neither more nor less unequal than they ever have been.

"Social mobility in the cultural sector is currently an important issue in government policy and public discussion, associated with perceptions of a collapse in numbers of working-class origin individuals becoming artists, actors, musicians and authors.

"These shifts also correspond to changes in the class origins of the overall working population, suggesting both that there is nothing particularly special about the relationship between social mobility and creative work, and that while cultural jobs appear more exclusive in terms of their class recruitment profiles than before, this may not mean that they have become more closed to working-class people. In other words, rising exclusivity may simply be a function of the changing shape
of the U.K. class structure since the 1960s.

"What this analysis confirms is that the shifts that can be observed in recruitment into cultural work over the past 50 years have been driven primarily by changes in the shape of Britain's—increasingly middle-class—class structure.

"Despite the perception that it is becoming increasingly difficult for those from working-class origins to gain access to creative work, at no point since the 1950s has it been any easier or, indeed, harder, for them to access creative work relative to those from other class backgrounds. It has always been relatively difficult."


Provided by British Sociological Association

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