

Review

Hard Times

Hired: Six Months Undercover in Low-Wage Britain by James Bloodworth

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Hard times are just around the corner as the trade war between the United States and China hots up and more of the world wobbles, spinning precariously out of control. This is nothing new to the bottom billion that Frantz Fanon when writing about the colonized dubbed ‘The Wretched (or Damned) of the Earth’. Yet even here in Britain, sixty years later, in one of the wealthiest ‘metropolitan’ countries, many either live in penury or are merely four to six weeks away from it. Hard times are simply the way of life for a third of our people, some twenty-two million men, women, and children.

James Bloodworth has decided to investigate the circumstances of the four or five million people at the bottom of this heap; those living just above the minimum wage, on it, or below it. He’s not writing about Jack London’s *People of the Abyss*, or the utilitarian horror lampooned by Dickens in *Hard Times*, but millions of all-too ordinary jobs in modern Britain and the people who have to struggle along on what such work brings them.

James Bloodworth, a successful journalist, was a working class lad, who like myself has risen into the middle class by way of university and professionalization. Consequently, he benefits from a practical insight into the petty humiliations and sustained disregard which many poorer working people experience - experiences that statistics and objective studies often conceal. Consequently, there is nothing neutral about his account of life at the bottom. No objectivity is contrived; he has taken a lesson from Old Etonian, George Orwell, by

writing, appalled and outraged, in a style that is both calm and as clear as a bell.

His six months in low-paid work was spread over the year 2016 taking jobs in Rugeley, Blackpool, London, and the South Wales Valleys. He worked variously in a call-centre, as a care worker, an Uber driver, and as an order picker in a vast Amazon warehouse, called by the company a ‘Fulfilment Centre’ where all – bosses, supervisors, and workers, the high and low alike – were ‘Associates’, and nobody was ever sacked, but simply ‘released’.

The world he describes is one, not simply of low pay, electronic monitoring, and long hours, but of delayed payments, and frequent underpayment; incompetence by employment agency bookkeepers, which often borders on swindling. This, together with poor housing and high rents, complete a thoroughly woebegone picture, in circumstances in which toilet breaks at work are tightly timed, and food at home is necessarily cheap, of poor quality and, more often than not, simply bought at the nearest takeaway.

He describes a dismal world in which rudeness, and arbitrary actions by managers, supervisors, and landlords, are *de rigour*, a world of short-term tenancies, in which homelessness, destitution, and routine violence, are unnervingly close. But, there was some fun too, like James’ first night in Blackpool – “A glorious evening in the bars along the seafront”, which predictably enough resulted in a wretched hangover.

Throughout the book nostalgia for a time in which industrial workers had proper jobs in close communities, where respect and stability was the order of the day, hovers over the pages. He has done his best in *Hired* to dampen down this dream of the past, but it keeps bobbing up. Rather like, Owen Jones, in *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class*, James tends to conflate the working class with the poorly paid, the homeless, and the unemployed. *Hired* is specifically about the low-paid and touches upon the life of the destitute, it is a book “about class” as James boldly asserts, but its focus is upon a particularly embattled section of a class, not the upon the working class as a whole.

The complexity and variety of working class experience can be effaced by assumptions that poverty pay and terrible conditions of employment are usual for those said to belong to the working class. Train drivers can earn £50,000 a year, a qualified teacher's pay can exceed £35,000, while nurses in the middle pay bands can earn between £22,000 and £35,000. The truth is many working class people earn very much more than the seventeen and a half thousand (Gross) that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation counts as an essential minimum for a single person. A fairly large section of working class people (in income terms) blend comfortably into the lower echelons of the middle class. Indeed this is why the airlines, hotels, restaurants, bars, hairdressers, manicurists, spas, holiday companies, and other luxury (or discretionary spend) businesses do so well.

Yet this relative prosperity is described in *Hired* as illusory and as a product of the “palliative of consumerism”. This has led James Bloodworth into counterposing the misery of the poorly paid with the good life of the better off, as if the latter in some way causes the former.

Freedom, if it is to mean anything at all, must mean the freedom for everyone to live decently rather than the freedom of a growing consumer class to order another class around.

He describes the “burgeoning consumer class” permanently drawing “upon a reserve army of drudges.” He seems to believe that low wages and bad conditions are produced by mass consumption – this is of a piece with the outlook of most of the British left, and results in a moralism that hangs over the book like a cloud of confusion.

Let me be clear, it is extremely important to consider the differences between those engaged in routine manual or clerical labour (the working class), and those who have a larger measure of control over their employment and the performance of their jobs (the middle class). But it is also vital to note the vastly different circumstances that exists between people *within* the same class, which are likely to

strongly effect their cultural perceptions and political behaviour.

“The consumer class” doesn’t exist, it is a figment of James Bloodworth’s imagination – mass consumption is a feature of all highly developed capitalist economies and in one way or another embraces the entire population. Even the very poor strive for fashionable trainers, for package holidays bought through the *Sun* newspaper, for jewellery, scratch cards, and lottery tickets. The low-paid are just as imaginative and aspirational as the rest of us.

Moral indignation about some being well-heeled while others are struggling, and suggesting that the well-paid, simply by consuming, consign the poor to their benighted condition is a recipe for exacerbating social antagonisms that can lead nowhere at all. The oppressed and exploited need rather more than this nonsense about an imaginary class of consumers.

But to give James Bloodworth his due, he does understand the importance of proper trade union organisation – trade unionism built around the problems of those living with zero hours and contractless occupations, those ensnared by bogus self-employment, and those at the bottom of the heap: migrant farm workers, Deliveroo lads on bikes, and the men and women trapped in call centres, warehouses, and social care. In *Hired* he notes that the preoccupations of the traditional left and of a trade union movement largely concentrated in transport and the public sector have left a great swathe of people at the bottom of the labour market entirely unprotected. Consequently, he clearly senses the need for new kinds of trade unionism as the only means of challenging the arbitrary rule of minimum-wage employers.

Despite its political weakness *Hired* is a well-written, passionate, and informative book that everyone should read.