



## Jade and the Bossnappers

**PEOPLE'S PRINCESS**, Jade Goody, was laid to rest last week in as much pomp as the journey of the funeral cort'age from Bermondsey to Essex could afford. The procession led by a vintage Rolls Royce, bearing Jade in a white coffin, wound its way through dismal inner city estates on a tortuous route to St John the Baptist parish church in prosperous Buckhurst Hill; her final journey was meant to symbolise Jade's progress from an obscure life in a tough working class neighbourhood to that of a world famous star living in a wealthy suburb. Thousands crowded the pavements along the route and many more gathered outside the church under the clatter of Sky Television's helicopter. Jenny Reinke, a middle-aged woman in the crowd, expressed the feelings of many when she said: "She was one of us, down to earth. We couldn't all get rich and famous, but she could do it for us."

With these words, Mrs Reinke, echoed the mawkish sentiment, which dominated the proceedings. Kitsch rhymes and vulgar floral tributes, crowds lining the streets in a burlesque of a state funeral to mark the life and death of a young woman whose only talent was to be brazenly ordinary and boldly ignorant. She evidently captured the imagination of more than the poor and uneducated; in her life, and in her manner of leaving it she garnered many admirers among the educated and well placed. Favourable comments from the Prime Minister, and widespread sympathy from

media figures and commentators, gave the former dental nurse the aura of success as her nearest and dearest celebrated the life of a person whose principal talent was simply the capacity “to be herself”. She was, as Mrs Reinke, put it, “Down to Earth”.

This was a dazzling achievement, particularly in a society in which the working class was thought to have died some decades ago. “But was Jade working class?” I can hear you ask. Surely she was some kind of *chav*, a vulgar person, capable of unseemly racist eruptions, ignorant and ostentatious? Well, she was clearly all of those things, but she started out as a dental nurse. She was poorly educated and had had few opportunities to acquire the modulation and manners of polite society or the sophisticated tastes of the fashionable. In this regard she was pretty much like millions of our own fellow citizens.

The working class is composed of all those people who engage in manual or routine clerical labour; it is composed of all those who work for wages, have no significant capital, and have little or no control over how they carry out their jobs day in and day out. Among these millions we can number hairdressers, shop assistants, deliverymen, motor mechanics, call centre workers, a host of other occupations, and a dental nurse called Jade. Without doubt Jade Goody was, before she acquired an investment income, a member of the working class. This was her asset; it was what made her famous. Blithely unaware of her shortcomings, she thought she was as good as anybody else. This was why she fascinated.

For many years we have heard much about the underclass, those impoverished people eking out their existence on incapacity benefit; the chronically sick, the long-term unemployed, those lads in black hoodies dangerous on mountain bikes, shell-suited girls who mill about poor estates and shopping precincts amidst a welter of buggies, poverty and criminality. These people, the poor, the neglected, the excluded, those without bank accounts, have somehow become muddled up in our minds with the

working class. Consequently, the working class is thought by many people to be synonymous with those doing unskilled manual work, those with episodic or marginal employment, those beset with ill-health and poverty.

This sociology of poverty has produced a corresponding political rhetoric about disadvantage and exclusion that has led even the Tories, in an improbable excess of empathy, down the “Something must be done” path towards tough love and welfare reform. In these circumstances it was not at all surprising that Jade Goody should fascinate. She was a member of the working class, articulate and confident according to her own lights, and beholden to no one. When, in the media lottery of Big Brother she discovered that she could enchant for money, there was no stopping her. Fame, infamy, and fortune beckoned. That she was laid low by cancer was understood by all as appalling bad luck, bad luck, which she managed with considerable skill to the advantage of her children, their father, and her young husband.

To the well educated, to the middle class, to the well established, Jade sounded like a member of the “underclass”, she seemed just like another ignorant *chav*. That she was also confident, had great charm, was capable of overcoming her disastrous encounter with Shilpa Shetty, and was capable of good judgement was entirely bewildering. Many people simply didn't know where to place her.

This is because, in a society where the mass of poorly educated working people are incessantly characterised as the victims of exclusion and disadvantage, the idea of confident, articulate, well-organised working people, has simply disappeared from view. In the twenty odd years since the defeat of the coal miners in Britain and the international collapse of communism, the political and social existence of the working class has simply slipped below the horizon, leaving many on the left to console themselves with a pastiche of radical politics cobbled together from anti-

capitalist campaigns for peace, helping the poor, and saving the biosphere. The idea of struggling for a new social dispensation in which collective action and social solidarity is put at the top of the agenda has been frittered away, leaving the field open for the bourgeois triumphalism of the boom years in which Jade got rich and famous *on our behalf*, because obviously, “we could not all get rich and famous” together.

Now, as the crisis begins to dissolve these illusions and break up this nonsense, the working class is beginning to reappear. First, in the form of protectionist strikes against foreign workers, now in rooftop protests, sit-ins and occupations like that at the Visteon plants in Belfast, Enfield and Basildon, in factory occupations like those at Prisme Packaging in Dundee, and in direct action protests against school closures in Glasgow. These struggles and those spreading throughout Europe, from bossnapping in France to uproar in Greece, are drawing literally millions of people into political activity. According to the Italian General Confederation of Labour (Cgil), last Friday 2.7 million working people marched in Rome against Berlusconi and his neo-fascist allies. Rome’s workers and students were joined by hundreds of thousands from out of town who used dozens of trains, two boats, and 7,000 buses to get to the demo. From one end of Europe to the other, millions of people are evidently moving towards a greater consciousness of their own organisational capacities.

This renewed activity might ebb away again as it has done in the past, wrecked on the Manichean rocks of the class war, leaving tiny millenarian sects and revolutionary groupuscule to hone their recondite analyses. Or, these struggles might grow into an articulate engagement with capitalist society, making cogent and deliverable demands, developing strategies that actually strengthen capitalist society and democracy by enhancing social solidarity. Let’s hope it’s the latter, because if it isn’t Jade Goody might return to haunt us all.