The enigma of the bogan and its significance to class in Australia: A socio-historical analysis

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Abstract
This analysis offers a historical perspective to chart the contested discourses that inform understandings of the figure of the ‘bogan’, suggesting its evocation reflects unresolved tensions and accumulated meanings left by the various reconfigurations of class politics since colonial settlement in Australia. We focus on three key historical periods to show how socio-political formations influence both classed identities and class relations: the 1890s, when the ethos of the labour movement was established as the central imaginative motif of a nascent Australian nation; the post-war years, when Robert Menzies offered a political project grounded in the experiences of the middle classes; and the 1990s, where there were complex translocations of class allegiances. We trace how several meaning(s) of class have accumulated and been reworked across these periods and, related to this, how the ‘bogan’ is a composite of left- and right-wing political ideas that articulate different kinds of virtue and unworthiness.

Keywords
class, class culture, culture, methodology, political sociology, social movements, sociological theory, sociology

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In this article, we consider the figure of the ‘bogan’ within the context of both contemporary transnational tendencies to stigmatise working-class identities (Jones, 2011; Nichols, 2011; Tyler, 2015) and the socio-historical specificity of classed relations in Australia. Since the early 2000s, ‘bogan’ has been widely used to reference working-class people in the media, popular culture and everyday discourse in ways that are similar to usages of ‘chav’ in Britain, and which are striking for the ways in which they display vociferous class hostility and disgust (Jones, 2011; Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008, 2015). While similarities are evident, however, there is something peculiarly Australian about the bogan, whose meanings are more indeterminate and ambivalent than those associated with ‘chavs’ (Gibson, 2013; Rossiter, 2013; Threadgold, 2018; Warr et al., 2018). A comparative analysis of references to ‘bogans’ and ‘chavs’ in the media found that while both figures were used to stereotype and denigrate working-class people, there were examples of the former eliciting positive identifications (Warr et al., 2018). Further, ‘bogans’ are occasionally deployed as a trope for unsettling middle-class cultural hegemony in ways that are not evident in analyses of references to ‘chavs’ (Warr et al., 2018). The enigma of the bogan is that it defies simple categorisation. It can serve as an illusion, as Nichols (2011) claimed. It can also articulate the kind of ‘class hatred’ that has been associated with depictions of the chav (Jones, 2011; Tyler, 2015). At the same time, the bogan is an ambiguous figure in the social and cultural imagination, which is used to both celebrate and mock notions of ‘Australian-ness’ and working-class culture (Gibson, 2013; Rossiter, 2013; Threadgold, 2018:85). We argue that these discordant meanings are bundled together in the figure of the bogan and reflect a series of distinctive socio-historical class contexts in Australia.

It is tempting to compare bogans to chavs because of the sociocultural similarities between the two largely English-speaking countries. It is not coincidental that these figures gained circulation during periods of rising unemployment, economic precariouslyness and downward social mobility. Under the influence of neoliberal narratives emphasising individual responsibility (Gough, 2002), and in contexts of what Beck (1992: 88) described as ‘the phenomena of a capitalism without classes, but with individualised social inequality’, the abject figures of bogans and chavs reveal a proclivity to disparage, pathologise and demonise poor working-class people, as well as to blame them for their poverty. While similar depictions and narratives are also evident in other countries (Kolehmainen, 2017; Wray and Newitz, 1997), the specificity of local socio-historical contexts in this case make the difference between the clearly reviled chav and the ambiguous bogan. Australian analyses have noted the indeterminate and oscillating meanings of bogan that personify tensions between ‘poverty versus cultural lack, denigratory versus celebratory humour and body versus landscape’ (Gibson, 2013:67). This indeterminacy offers wider potential for identifying, at least partially, with its complex and fluid meanings (Rossiter, 2013: 88–9).

This article offers a set of reflections on the indeterminacy in the meanings of ‘bogan’ by considering the socio-historical significance of working-class identities. It suggests that the figure evokes unresolved tensions and contradicitions associated with complex reconfigurations of class politics since colonial settlement in Australia. We argue that within these dynamics the figure of the bogan reflects accumulated meanings vis-à-vis key socio-historical and political formations that have shaped classed identities. This
perspective departs from earlier studies that consider the elusive etymology of the term ‘bogan’ itself (Gibson, 2013; Nichols, 2011), to propose that its ambiguity arises because it is a syncretic concept that retains residues of the shifting significance of working-class identities over time. The analysis addresses sociological concerns focusing on the devalued meanings of contemporary working-class identities, and our approach draws on political history to trace the sediments of meaning that have accumulated in these identities and which have become subsequently attributed to the figure of the bogan. In addition to offering new perspectives on class relations in Australia, this interdisciplinary strategy responds to critiques of ‘presentism’ in sociological analyses that tend to emphasise social discontinuities while neglecting the historical contingencies that contour contemporary social life (Inglis, 2014: 100).

To develop this argument further, we focus on three periods that were prominent in the formation of class politics in Australia (Kirk, 2011). We consider these periods as crystallising a contemporary socio-political ethos that set the tone and contours for class politics over ensuing years. In discussing these periods, we draw on texts that provided influential analyses of their significance. We work closely with historical textual analyses, as very little exists in the way of synthetic literature charting the transformation of rival class discourses across the breadth of Australian history (see Paternoster, 2017). This article builds on previous work identifying ‘the Australian Legend’ as a formative part of class discourse in Australia (Paternoster, 2017).

Our approach is also informed by British historical scholarship on class that frames language not just ideationally, but as a material practice that is produced through speech and texts (Stedman Jones, 1983). For Stedman Jones (1983: 2), class ‘has acted as a congested point of intersection between many competing, overlapping or simply differing forms of discourse’. He argues that, rather than treating language simply as a reflection of social reality, it is necessary ‘to study the production of interest, identification, grievance, and aspiration in political languages themselves’ (Stedman Jones, 1983: 22). In the remainder of this article we have engaged in such scholarly tasks by setting out the historical context (across three periods) and discourses that have, in different ways, shaped contemporary meanings of the ‘bogan.’

Three eras of class politics in Australia

The first period we focus on is the 1890s, when the ethos of the labour movement was established as the central imaginative motif of a nascent Australian nation. Looking back at this decade, the historian Russel Ward, in his study The Australian Legend (1978 [1958]), identified the emergence of what he termed a ‘national mystique’ that he characterised as egalitarian, anti-authoritarian and collectivist. The mystique, he suggests, was a widely celebrated ethos in contemporary literature and music, which offered an account of national identity that both drew from, and infused, an ascendant and militant trade union movement in ways that enhanced its significant political influence. This mystique was embodied in the legendary figure of an Australian bushman, some of whose characteristics can be discerned in the contemporary bogan. By the mid-20th century, the Legend’s cultural resonance had waned and Robert Menzies articulated an alternative vision of Australian identity that strongly appealed to the electorate. This is the second
period we focus on – the decades of the 1940s and 1950s – when Menzies established the Liberal Party and went on to become Australia’s longest serving prime minister. Judith Brett’s authoritative account of this era in her book, *The Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class* (2003), attributes his political success partly to the way in which Menzies was able to articulate a post-war political project for the middle classes that contested and defused the previously formidable political power of the labour movement. Menzies achieved this, Brett claims, by articulating the middle class as the new heart of Australian national identity politically defusing the power of conflictual class ideologies. While Brett’s account might be criticised for giving too much credence to the influence of Menzies in forging societal change (see Hollier, 2003), for our purposes, her account has considerable merit because of the attention she pays to the language of politics itself.

The *fin de siècle* years of John Howard’s prime ministership is the third period that we focus on. If Australia’s emergent working-class identity was effectively inverted by Menzies to become middle class, the 1990s marked a phase of complex class translocations and increasingly polarised class identities. While Menzies presided over an era of post-war prosperity, Howard came to power following a period of social and economic turbulence and is associated with the growing influence of neoliberal policies. A ‘new’ middle class emerged and embraced a reworked left-wing politics, while sections of the working class were reimagined as a ‘battler’ middle class and courted by the political right. Within these translocations, the bogan and its historical residues of class meanings acquired discursive currency as an amalgam of left- and right-wing political ideas. Across these three periods, Ward’s analysis of the Australian mystique and Brett’s analysis of the Liberal tradition under the leadership of Robert Menzies and John Howard suggest how sociocultural narratives re/conceptualised class identities and affinities. In the final section of the article, we consider the sociological implications of our argument that the enigmatic bogan is a repository of left- and right-wing claims.

**The 1890s and a formative egalitarian ethos**

Alongside dispossession of the Aboriginal population, and despite the moral and economic legacy of convictism, by the mid-1800s the Australian colonies had forged a reputation for being a land of egalitarian opportunities. This idealisation reflected the perspectives of settlers who were able to cognitively dissociate from injustices that were perpetrated upon Aboriginal peoples – displacement, land theft, frontier wars and massacres, ‘blackbirding’ and stolen wages. Many of those transported to Australia rejected the class oppression of the British, owing to their own disenfranchisement as Irish Catholics or working-class radicals. The absence of an established, European-style aristocracy helped to cement a perception of Australia as egalitarian (Connell and Irving, 1992: 1–12). John Rickard (1976: 290) argued that:

> It was taken for granted that in a pioneer situation old-world class barriers ceased to apply. Of course by 1890 few Australians could be said to be living in a pioneer situation, but evidence of this influence was easily found. In Australia everyone worked. There was no leisured class.

By the 1880–90s, a previously generalised perception of egalitarianism became associated with a newly formed working-class movement (Ward, 1978 [1958]). For the key
decades in which a nascent Australian sense of identity was developing, the labour force was largely white, landless and agricultural. The value of commodities such as wool and coal ensured that the Australian economy had the capacity to pay high wages. Unionisation sought to protect and extend these conditions, and its success included establishing the world’s first eight-hour working day. The sociocultural homogeneity of the landless, but otherwise relatively well-off labourers, was the social basis for Australia coming to imagine itself as a (white, male) workers’ paradise at a time when the nation was contem- plating the qualities of its emergent identity.

Our point here, drawing on Ward (1978 [1958]) and others such as Anderson (2006) is that the political tradition of Australian labourism successfully established a socio- political narrative that focused on the experiences of white, male bush-labourers. This constructed narrative is key to understanding an enduring meaning of ‘class’ in the new nation. Its qualities came to be seen as quintessentially Australian, forming a reservoir of imagery from which the ‘bogan’ could later be selectively constructed. This is not, of course, to argue that Australian social life was any way near to being egalitarian. The realities of everyday life differed from their perceived image as is always the case in imagined identities of nationalism (see Anderson, 2006). These senses of meaning about nation and class were built on a selective account of labour relations that combined contradictory realities such as the oppression of Indigenous peoples (Wilson, 2003), and the disdainful attitudes towards, and treatment of, women (see Dixson, 1976). Dixson put this paradox front and centre in the opening of her book, The Real Matilda:

[Australia had] one of the world’s strongest trade union movements … [and] among the most advanced industrial democracies in the world […] yet the overall standing of women […] comes close to the lowest among Western industrial democracies. (Dixson, 1976:21)

The cognitive sublimation of the underside of Australian life, however, meant that the late 19th century was framed in retrospect as tantalisingly egalitarian, an impression that was further reinforced with the publication of Ward’s book, The Australian Legend, in 1958.

Ward identified an itinerant but ‘honourable’ bush ethos that was distinctly ‘Australian’ and which emanated out of the combined influence of a strong trade union movement, popular periodicals such as the Bulletin and the Worker, and the writing of poets and novelists (Ward, 1978 [1958]: 13). This ethos, distilled in journalistic pieces, songs, stories, poetry and paintings, contributed to cementing a stereotype of the typical Australian, even though by the 1890s most Australians were already living in cities. The stereotype was a pastiche of anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism, larrikinism and working-class masculinity that is captured in an often-cited passage from Ward’s book:

According to the myth the ‘typical Australian’ is a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improvisor, ever willing ‘to have a go’ at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is ‘near enough’. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. Though he is ‘the world’s best confidence man’, he is usually taciturn rather than talkative, one who endures stoically rather than one who acts busily. He is a ‘hard case’, sceptical about the value of religion and of intellectual and cultural pursuits generally. (Ward, 1978 [1958]: 1–2)
This characterisation of the typical ‘Australian’ anticipates several of the qualities that, over a century later, have come to be associated with the bogan, such as an antipathy towards intellectual and cultural pursuits, capacities for inventive improvisation, predictions for swearing, gambling and alcohol and being disinclined to work (too) hard.

Revisiting and analysing this ‘national mystique’ in the 1950s, Ward’s study explained its historical significance to mid-20th-century Australia. As a fellow-traveller of the Communist Party, Ward had some interest in reviving an ethos that he associated with the 1890s and which might revitalise left-wing politics in the post-war era. Unsurprisingly, given its problematic blind spots, his work was subsequently the target of vociferous ‘New Left’ critics in the late 1960s, who were concerned to distinguish their politics from the antiquated ideas of the ‘old left’ (Bongiorno, 2008). In a lacerating critique, Humphrey McQueen famously dismissed Ward, and other contemporary labour historians, as ‘legenders’. Despite Ward’s insistence that he was analysing an influential myth, he was castigated for romanticising a spirit of Australian egalitarianism that depended on white-washing a colonial history of racism, tolerating misogyny and overplaying the radicalism of the labour movement (Macintyre, 1972; McQueen, 1970).

The political influence of the labour movement during the 1890s, and the egalitarian ethos that it cultivated, was strongly infused with working-class sentiment that had popular and electoral appeal in the early years of the 20th century (Dyrenfurth, 2010). The traits associated with Ward’s ‘Legend’ invoked specific kinds of working-class experience, some of which can be traced to contemporary stereotypes of ‘bogans’, including its associations with masculinity (Pini and Previte, 2014).

If working-class identities were prominent in Australia’s emergent sense of national identity, however, this was changing by the early 1940s, when the newly established Liberal Party asserted a set of traditional middle-class social values and reframed trade union activism. Vestigial notions of national identity that flourished in the 1890s were folded into new, and distinctly ‘Liberal’ political narratives in ways that required revising, rather than repudiating, the significance of egalitarianism in Australian identity. To develop our argument, we consider this second formative political period: the post-war years in which Robert Menzies articulated an alternative vision of national identity that Brett characterised as that of the ‘moral middle class’. This vision offered a different account of class politics to that of the labour movement by normalising the values of individualism. In the next final two sections, we draw extensively on Brett’s analysis in her book, Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class (2003). Her analysis is novel in seeking to understand the class politics of Liberalism from within, as an alternative imagination of ‘class’ from that offered by the Labor Party. Keeping in mind the concerns of Dyrenfurth (2005) and Hollier (2003), such as the risks of taking the words of politicians at face value and overlooking the ways in which they were the product of class experience, her work sheds considerable light on pivotal periods in the transformation of notions of class in Australia.

**The 1950s and the consolidation of the Liberal tradition**

Rejecting Labor’s sectarian working-class politics, the conservative parties sought to articulate a political project that appealed to the virtues they believed they best represented
The current Liberal Party was established in 1944, winning the 1949 election and holding government until 1972. Brett argues that this electoral dominance can be attributed to the ways in which the party sought to naturalise middle-class values, whose appeal had hitherto been undermined by both the demographic dominance of the working classes and the tenets that they represented.

Brett (2003: 9) describes the Liberal Party’s worldview and social base in the 1950s as a ‘moral middle class’ which eschewed the ‘very idea of economically based social identity and economically based social classification’. This understanding of middle-class identity distinguished itself from the ‘working class’ by dismissing the significance of economic fissures and aspiring to be a ‘class of individuals’ defined by:

Their individual attributes and moral qualities. Crucial to the political logic of the way the term operates is that people possess these virtues as individuals rather than as members of a class. (Brett, 2003: 9)

Brett is careful here to distinguish ‘virtues’ from ‘values’, the latter of which ‘implies attitudes and opinions held by the self and detachable from it’ (2003: 9). In contrast, virtues ‘are constitutive of the self, part of its character or very nature, and immune from the relativising morality inherent in the concept of value’ (2003: 9–10). Their morality was their identity, at the same time as defining the moral standards for Australians to aspire to. Janet McCalman described this as an ‘aristocracy of virtue’ (cited in Brett, 2003: 10). These virtues ‘underpinned the pre-war middle class’s claim to political power’), even as the Liberal Party’s claim for legitimacy rested on assertions that it represented all Australians (Brett, 2003: 10).

Conservatives professed certainty about the moral foundations of middle-class virtues and subscribed to a Protestant-inspired ethic that viewed wealth, education and respectable vocations as demonstrating the moral worth of individuals (Brett, 2003: 9–11). These underpinned the tacit belief that middle-class individuals were the best people to govern for ‘all Australians’. These assumptions involved a corollary notion that members of the working class lacked the required virtues, revealing an inherent moral unworthiness. This form of circular logic was apparent in other discussions of class-based worthiness. For instance, in his study of coalmining in New South Wales Andrew Metcalfe (1990) noted that mine owners argued that they should not be obliged to provide miners with washing facilities, reasoning that miners must be comfortable with being dirty or they wouldn’t have chosen to be miners. Within a similar logic, a morally defined ‘middle class’ interpreted its economic and cultural privileges as evidence of its own fitness to rule.
Liberal politicians viewed the professional agitators of Labor as damaging the fabric of Australian society for their own selfish ends and regretted being obliged to mimic Labor’s ‘conflictual modes’ of political organisation in order to achieve electoral success (Brett, 2003: 11). In particular, Liberals resented being forced to play Labor’s game of class politics and rejected the latter’s ‘false class war’, even as the former self-identified as middle class (Brett, 2003: 8). It is important to underline the uniqueness of Australian politics in this regard: the conservative tradition was formed after, and in reaction to, the naturalisation and successes of the labour movement. It has always defined itself in oppositional terms, making it a particularly anti-progressive variant of political liberalism.

Robert Menzies led the Liberals to power because he was able to offer an alternative narrative of Australian identity that was less a defence of inequality, privileged education and the rule of the crown, than a counter-narrative asserting the normative significance of middle-class virtues. He reframed the middle classes as numerically significant, worthy and honest people. Far from being aristocratic, Menzies described the middle class as the ‘forgotten people’:

I do not believe that the real life of this nation is to be found either in great luxury hotels and the petty gossip of so-called fashionable suburbs, or in the officialdom of the organised masses …

[The forgotten class are] those people who are constantly in danger of being ground between the upper and nether millstones of the false class war; the middle class who, properly regarded, represent the backbone of this country. (cited in Brett, 2003: 8)

These entreaties to the forgotten people reformulated elements of the national mystique that was identified by Ward, including its egalitarian flavour. Crucial to its success was Menzies’ ability to position the middle class against both the powerful capitalists and left-wing political agitators. Menzies did not directly oppose the populism which extolled the virtues of the ordinary, egalitarian Australian against the influence of foreign capital. Rather, he managed to position the middle class as a substitute for Labor’s concept of the ‘people’. He conjured images of hard-working, politically quiet suburban families, which could appeal to shopkeepers, professionals, and conservative working-class voters. The enemy were those people that were uninterested in middle class virtue, such as agitators and larrikins. These qualities today are associated with ‘bogans’.

The social basis for this successful reworking of class identities was the economic and political environment of the post-war boom. Post-war prosperity presented opportunities for many working-class people to identify with the conservative and liberal economic philosophy of the Liberal party. In addition, Menzies projected his own version of egalitarianism – which partly resonated with established working-class values – onto the new social category of virtuous non-elites, which he termed the ‘forgotten people’. His success in achieving this neutralised the prevailing political dominance of Labor and imbued conservative politics with a revised version of egalitarianism, which was blended with extant concepts of virtue as an individual quality. The anti-communism of the Cold War, the Chifley government’s suppression of strikes in 1949, the resulting splits in the Labor
Party in 1954–5 and the economic conditions of the post-war boom combined to create a riposte to those maintaining both the relevance and the constructive possibilities of the politics of class conflict. Wage opportunities, home ownership and the increasing availability of consumer products led many working-class Australians to believe that social mobility could be achieved through hard work and self-discipline.

An ambiguous dissolution and preservation of class categories, however, contributed to renewing the significance of distinctions between a respectable and unrespectable working class, where the former was identified according to the quotient of middle-class virtue they embodied or displayed. The social historian Lynette Finch (1993) argued that the prominence of the ‘respectable’ working class over the mid to late 20th century served to render the ‘unrespectable’ poor invisible, although the Henderson Report (Henderson, 1975) revealed that poverty continued to be experienced across Australia. The well-paid, stable sections of the wage-labour force were accorded certain levels of dignity because they could be conceived as emulating the middle class. As the long boom receded in the mid-1970s and ushered in conditions of post-industrialisation, the impacts in working-class communities, such as those in Melbourne’s working-class suburb of Doveton (Glover, 2015), undermined the potential for many households to sustain their ‘respectability’. Existing affinities between the respectable working class and the moral middle class began to unravel. Aggravating these conditions was an emphasis on individual responsibility that was given impetus by the growing influence of neoliberal ideologies over subsequent decades. Distinctions between the respectable and unrespectable working class became less pronounced through worsening economic circumstances and the increasing significance of cultural preferences in strategies of social differentiation that devalued and disparaged working-class tastes and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; Skeggs, 2004).

In the meantime, the publication of Ward’s book in 1958 prompted a revival of academic and popular interest in the working-class legends of Australia’s settler history. The ‘rough but fair’ larrikinism that it chronicled renewed Australians’ fascination with anti-authority figures and events, such as Ned Kelly and the Eureka rebellion, although this was not extended to Indigenous peoples, contemporary slum-dwellers, immigrants or petty criminals. Our argument in the final section of this article is that this second historical period, characterised by impressions of social coherence that was presumed to be grounded in shared commitment to middle-class virtues and aspirations, was not sustained through the social and economic turbulence that followed. The ‘unrespectable’ working class resurfaced in the figure of the bogan following the reorganisation of class affinities in the third period that we consider: the late 1990s and early 2000s during the prime ministership of John Howard.

The 1990s and the ‘new class’ in Australia

One of the most significant effects of the post-war boom for class politics was the mass expansion of tertiary education. Universities that were traditionally institutions for educating the elite became settings that nurtured emergent socially progressive movements such as women’s and gay liberation, nuclear disarmament, anti-racism and environmental activism. These social movements reshaped left-wing politics and activism, as
(largely) middle-class socially progressive activists established a broad, and often uneasy, coalition with established forms of working-class trade union activism. The Australian Legend became a prominent target for New Left critiques, which rejected its romanticised and blinkered account of Australia’s formative history (McQueen, 1970; Macintyre, 1972).

The rejection of the old ‘legend’ ultimately created an environment in which Ward’s ‘typical Australian’ could be ridiculed by progressives as racist and ignorant. When combined with the moral middle-class’ disdain for the unrespectable working class, the contemporary figure of the ‘bogan’ could begin to take shape, although it was not yet given a name: quintessentially Australian, it was endearingly anti-intellectual, problematically uncultured and anti-politically correct. This was only possible because of changes in the composition of social classes and their politics in the latter part of the 20th century.

While the New Left promoted progressive causes, the expansion of tertiary education impacted on the middle-class base that traditionally supported the Liberal Party. Brett argues that:

A new section of the middle class was being formed, with views of its particular capacities and moral strengths somewhat at odds with that of the pre-war moral middle class […] where the old moral middle class offered the nation their virtuous characters constructed over a lifetime of self-discipline, members of the new middle class offered the expert knowledges and administrative capacities they had acquired through education. (Brett, 2003: 140–1)

A proportion of the new middle class found employment in the national government as public servants, and this attenuated traditional associations between education and Liberal traditions. This cadre of professionals ‘became a natural constituency for Labor’s more expansive view of the possibilities of state action and its impatience with the constraints of federalism’ (Brett, 2003: 140). It connected knowledge-based state management and Labor’s new brand of socialism, aligning these educated professionals with left-wing politics at a time when tertiary education was rapidly expanding (Brett, 2003: 141). Gough Whitlam recognised that this realignment meant that individuals who would once have been the natural constituency of the Liberal tradition were now aligned with Labor. The political commentator, Paul Kelly (1994: 20) noted that ‘Whitlam modernised the Labor Party which became a respectable party for the expanding middle classes.’

These political realignments deepened the gulf between the experiences of the traditional working classes – blue-collar workers – and their leadership, who increasingly resembled their erstwhile political adversaries. This was exacerbated by the combination of declining union membership, due to a shrinking blue-collar workforce and an expanding, educated professional workforce (Briggs et al., 2002), fuelling perceptions that Labor was orienting towards the elite. The push to globalise and deregulate the economy under the Hawke–Keating Labor governments further reinforced sentiments of class division, if not perceptions of class betrayal.

Over time, these divergent perspectives and experiences within the Labor Party have been difficult to reconcile. Insiders, such as Michael Thompson (1999: ix–x), expressed their exasperation with the party’s efforts to hold together disparate political interests. He argued that the tertiary-educated advocates of social progressivism had taken over while
displaying contempt for the contributions of traditional, less educated, blue-collar members. At the same time, he blithely dismissed the necessity of responding to social divisions and inequalities associated with gender and race, although these were increasingly difficult to ignore. In the context of perspectives such as Thompson’s, the once-radical forms and concerns of working-class politics became positioned against the newer forms of progressivism, and could now be perceived as socially (if not economically) conservative; a new target for progressive critique.

The Liberal narrative took a long time to catch up with these developments. By 1996, however, John Howard had found a way for Liberals to capture the language of nationalism for their party while retaining notions of the ‘individual rights and freedoms to which they are also committed’ (Brett, 2003: 216). Howard managed to blend the emerging ‘new class’ theories being popularised by the American right (Caswell, 1986; Davis, 2008: 30–7) with the traditional anti-class philosophy of his own party. Rather than championing the inherent moral virtue of the middle class, he echoed the populist ethos of Ward’s Legend, this time re-casting Labor in the role of the elites. This was an ideological manoeuvre that Menzies could never have envisaged in the 1950s, but which had become possible with the changing composition and orientation of the Labor Party by the late 20th century. Howard’s appeal to the Legend’s ethos is evident in speeches where he reformulated notions of ‘elite’ and ‘ordinary’ to argue that:

Symbols of national identity cannot be generated by a ‘self-appointed, cultural elite’, but ‘rather they are feelings and attitudes that grow out of the spirit of the people’. (cited in Brett, 2003: 196)

According to Brett:

Howard posited two sources for these [feelings and attitudes]: great traumatic events, such as Gallipoli; and ‘long usage and custom’, such as our tradition of ‘informal mateship and egalitarianism’. (Brett, 2003: 196)

In the 1996 election, Howard played on disillusionment among blue-collar voters who deserted Labor in droves (Bean, 2000). He successfully appealed to the Legend, while divesting it of its class affinities by substituting ‘battlers’ for ‘workers’ and re-rooting working-class values of ‘mateship and egalitarianism’ in the experiences of the ANZACs at Gallipoli. In doing so, he broke historical associations between Australia’s ‘national mystique’ and trade unionist and communist discourses of class conflict and used his own version of the Legend against the progressive left to characterise Labor as a class of cultural elites who were aloof from the experiences and aspirations of ordinary Australians. Where the left had previously defined workers by contrasting them with ‘bosses’, they were now characterised by the right as ‘battlers’ with interests that aligned with small business owners. A key difference was that, in contrast to labour traditions, the struggles of ‘battlers’ are not against a class, but rather to work hard and live quiet suburban lives. Similarly, being elite was no longer associated with personal wealth, but with being highly educated and employed by state bureaucracies. Cahill (2001: 162) argued that Howard’s use of the language of ‘battlers’ was part of a neoliberal assault on:
The economic, political and cultural organization that underpinned the welfare state. The rhetoric of ‘powerful new class elites’ helps to undermine potential oppositional forces to neoliberalism by portraying them as other than ordinary, and represents publicly funded bodies as hostage to self-serving interests, thus helping to legitimize moves towards privatization and de-regulation.

The left was skewered as ‘elite’ in a way that neutered criticism of the Liberal Party’s connections with big business and its own ideological agenda to pare back the welfare state. Capitalists were no longer a separate, elite class; the elites, or the ‘chardonnay set’, were the bureaucrats in the public service, academics working in universities and those working in public institutions (such as the Australian Broadcasting Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission).

Since the end of the 20th century, the discursive creation of the ‘new class’ has become one of the most salient features of class discourse (see Cahill, 2001). It has displaced left-wing binaries between proletarians and the bourgeois, as well as notions of a virtuous middle class. Those on the political right were able to construct a new set of class terms revolving around ‘elites’, which are defined by their professional expertise and viewed as morally compromised by their self-interest in expanding state spending and control. Elites are now often described as ‘middle class’, but not in the sense of meaning ‘middle Australia’ or as the moral core of society as in Menzies’ formulation. Rather, the concept of the ‘middle class’ now draws on Howard’s version of the populist critique, in which selective elements of extant class conflict and anti-intellectual politics have been turned against their old masters. At the same time, Labor and the Greens can be construed as having adopted some of the individualist and morally virtuous attitudes of the Liberal tradition, such as holding up their educatedness as a virtue and assuming a moral superiority in contrast to others holding non-politically correct social attitudes.

In the spaces opened by these political shifts, long-standing distinctions between the respectable and unrespectable working class have resurfaced. Labor has sought to distance itself from the unions and workerist socialism, claiming instead to champion the interests of ‘working families’ (Lavelle, 2008: 53–4). When individual workers express racist, sexist or homophobic attitudes, however, these attitudes serve as evidence of being badly behaved and tasteless ‘bogans’ (Warr et al., 2018), who are therefore unrespectable and underserving of empathy. This resembles the assumptions that were once associated with the middle class, especially regarding the moral superiority of the university-educated. In response, right-wing parties have repositioned themselves as claiming to speak for ‘working’ or ‘ordinary’ Australians. However, their conception of ordinary Australians reduces the people that they claim to speak for to an opposing caricature as code for anti-progressivism and anti-political correctness, despite the existence of radical progressive politics among the union movement, as well as the ongoing influence of social democratic politics within large sections of the population.

These semantic shifts have been used to perform selective political translocations. Labor seeks to appeal to the middle class and distance itself from the concerns of the most socioeconomically vulnerable, while the Liberals distinguish between ‘ordinary and hardworking Australians’, who hold socially conservative or anti-progressive opinions and whose electoral support is sought, and other segments of the working class who
are portrayed as irresponsible, shiftless and even deceitful. The effect of these partial political translocations is that the bogan comes to serve as a repository for anti-progressive elements rejected by the left, and the inconvenient realities of the rampant capitalism afflicting working-class communities that has been ruthlessly pursued by the right. The bogan holds the inconsistencies arising from a middle-class influx that disrupted established narratives of equality and fairness in the Labor Party, as well as the new Liberal populism that is constrained by its own historical moral middle-class values. Those whose situations are the most precarious are identified as bogan and abandoned by both the left and right, albeit for different reasons.

These tensions are evident in the ways that the bogan is referenced by right-wing and progressive commentators. For example, Andrew Bolt (2014) came out with moralistic damnation in comments relating to Shapelle Corby’s arrest in Indonesia on drug-related charges, describing her as ‘a representative of Australia’s bogan culture’ and declaring that ‘Bogan criminals are not heroes’. In contrast, the former Howard government minister Amanda Vanstone (2017) responded to the 2017 budget by criticising the ‘clever’ people, claiming that ‘the ‘bogans’ and ‘deplorables’ have had enough’. This is powerful language for a former Liberal minister to use. The long-standing moral middle-class critique of Labor’s false class war is gone, and in its place she takes the side of ‘bogan’ critics of what she terms the ‘managerial class’. At the same time, the progressive media refer to bogans in ways that simultaneously imply that it is synonymous with being working class and being boorish or vapid. This is evident in a book review in *The Saturday Paper* (JR, 2017) where a character was described as a ‘bogan that reinvents herself’, and in a review in *The Age* where a character in a Wagner opera is referred to as ‘a loutish fool bogan’ (Shmith, 25 November 2013). These examples evidence the ongoing reverberations from the class and political realignments of the ‘new class’ period. References to bogans are now a common feature of the vernacular, and a widely acceptable – if generally disparaging – way of referencing working-class people (Nichols, 2011; Warr et al., 2018).

In discussing these three periods we have broadly traced the lineage of popular political attitudes and conditions that shaped popular notions of working-class identity, suggesting that these permutations of meaning have found expression in the figure of the bogan as a contemporary signifier of (largely, but not thoroughly, problematised) working-class dispositions in Australia. As a contested figure between major political traditions, the bogan is denigrated by the left for being socially regressive and by the right for being economically unproductive. Nonetheless, the bogan retains traces of a once-celebrated class egalitarianism that characterised a formative period of Australian history, and which was subsequently embroidered into stories of the camaraderie and selfless heroism on the distant battlefields of the First World War. To conclude, we consider the sociological significance of this analysis.

**Conclusion**

Focusing on three key periods in Australia’s socio-political history, we have provided an account that attends to shifting discourses in relation to class identity. Our claim is that the figure of the bogan represents the contested, accumulated history of working-class
identities within the context of a political culture divided between a populist, neoliberal Liberal Party and an increasingly middle-class, but socially progressive Labor Party. Our reading of this stereotype is therefore in contrast to Nichols’ (2011) assertion that it can be dismissed as illusory or meaningless, as well as other arguments that it is a simple expression of class hatred. In short, the figure of the bogan conveys the contemporary complexity of class. It is a product of a public reckoning with the value of work, intellect and cultural distinction within a nation that has been alternately captivated by its (idealised) egalitarian ethos and elitist notions of middle-class virtue that have each retained their usefulness in everyday discourse.

These three periods are notable because the first was the formative period in which working-class men came to be seen as the quintessential icons of Australianess; the second, because Menzies was able to invert this notion by reconceptualising the middle class as characteristically Australian; and the third, because of the complex translocations where the accumulated, divergent meanings of being working class were partially realigned in response to the reconfiguration of left- and right-wing political projects. The socioeconomic contexts of these periods were crucial: the power of unionised, white male labour in a largely agricultural economy; the unprecedented prosperity of the post-war boom during the Cold War; and the subsequent social turbulence and transformation of the post-war economic order in the last decades of the 20th century. Through its associations with working-class identities, the genealogy of the bogan can be traced across these socio-historical periods. In contemporary usage, the ‘bogan’ draws from an amalgam of left- and right-wing political ideas, constituting a troublesome leftover expunged from both in order to sustain a semblance of ideological coherence.

In these ways, the bogan is a vessel for kinds of social ventriloquism that Beilharz (2012) attributed to middle-class aspirations which drove New Left political activism. With the ascendency of the middle class in left-wing political projects and the incursions of the right into working-class politics, each group presumes to speak for (and about) working-class people. The bogan operates as a repository to articulate different kinds of unworthiness that are linked to the class translocations that have been outlined. Among progressives, the ‘bogan’ can be a stereotype that personifies sexist, racist and homophobic views. At the same time, its ambiguity enables the right to oscillate between defending conservative working-class battlers, or alternatively using it as a term to attack an ‘unrespectable’ displaced working class. These rhetorical tactics show how the poorest and most stigmatised individuals and communities have been forsaken by many commentators and politicians from both the political left and right.

The bogan, and particularly its associations with tastelessness, can also be linked to the universalisation of middle-class aspirations and practices in late capitalism (Savage, 2003). Within these complex dynamics, the meanings of ‘bogan’ are anything but resolved, and its deployment offers little capacity to convey contemporary experiences of class inequalities that are widening in Australia. Usage is likely to exacerbate a restive political uncertainty and the debasement of public discourse regarding issues of inequality and social justice. We believe that critical scholarship can contribute to a more sensitive and historically informed discussion of both stereotypes and the people that they are used to characterise. Sociologists are well-positioned to promote increased awareness of socially corrosive discourses featuring references to ‘bogans’. This includes developing
a public, sociologically inspired vocabulary for discussing socially structured inequalities in which scourges such as racism and sexism are considered in precise and specific ways, rather than projected onto unhelpful stereotypes. This discussion also underlines the usefulness of gaining sociological understanding of class phenomena by positioning them within socio-historical frameworks (Paternoster, 2017).

We hope that this article contributes to shifts towards understanding what is really being said when the ‘bogan’ is deployed in popular, social, cultural and political commentary. It carries the legacy of middle-class disdain for the poor, as well as New Left moral judgements, the mythologising of old-left labour and the anti-politically correct battlers of the New Right. None of these perspectives is capable of grasping the lives of Australians who are objectified, disregarded or romanticised as ‘bogans’.

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