

‘WHO THE HELL ARE ORDINARY PEOPLE?’

ORDINARINESS AS A CATEGORY OF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS*

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ABSTRACT. Ordinariness was a frequently deployed category in the political debates of 2016. According to one political leader, the vote for Brexit was ‘a victory for ordinary, decent people who’ve taken on the establishment and won’. In making this claim Nigel Farage sought to link a dramatic political moment with a powerful, yet conveniently nebulous, construction of the ordinary person. In this paper I want to historicise recent use of the category by returning to another moment when ordinariness held deep political significance: the years immediately following the Second World War. I will explore the range of values, styles, and specific behaviours that gave meaning to the claim to be ordinary; consider the relationship between ordinariness, everyday experience and knowledge; and map the political work ordinariness was called upon to perform. I argue that the immediate postwar period was a critical moment in the formation of ordinariness as a social category, an affective category, a moral category, a consumerist category and, above all, a political category. Crucially, ordinariness itself became a form of expertise, a finding that complicates our understanding of the ‘meritocratic moment’.

Introduction

Filmed in the winter of 1940–41, the Crown Film Unit documentary, *Ordinary People*, offered a glimpse of everyday London life in Blitz conditions.¹ Featuring factory, department

¹ J. B. Holmes and Jack Lee, *Ordinary People*, (London, 1941).

store and GPO workers alongside bombed out families and air raid shelter-dwellers, the film was clearly designed to garner foreign support for a people's war. *Ordinary People* was a celebration of ordinary life in the face of exceptional circumstance. Motifs of the ordinary interject throughout, notably in tea-based hospitality, the morning milk delivery and the purchase of a 'powder-blue' cardigan: that last detail is important. This powerful representation of a single wartime day ends with a harmonica-led sing along in the shelter, a reminder of the speed with which the unusual can become the norm.

Ordinariness permeated the production of this film as well as its content. The opening titles included a pointed instruction 'To the future historian' that 'THIS FILM WAS PLAYED BY ORDINARY PEOPLE OF LONDON.' The message was reinforced through Robert Menzies' spoken-to-camera introduction to the film; an introduction that celebrated ordinary people as the custodians of a set of values essential for allied victory:

You are going to see a film called *Ordinary People*. It is made by the people of London about the people of London, the plain people, the true people... Great things are happening in Britain but perhaps the greatest is the display of neighbourliness, of kindness, of cheerfulness, of uncomplaining suffering that is being given by ordinary people who secure no fame and who have no place in the headlines. In this picture you will catch a glimpse of that spirit which is the surest bulwark of Britain against senseless and indiscriminate bombing by the half civilised Hun. In brief in this picture you will see why Hitler cannot win.

Ordinary People was not of course the only wartime film that sought to valorise ordinariness. An emphasis upon the day-to-day dignity and emotional authenticity of the ordinary person

underpins the documentary work of Humphrey Jennings for example. And the attempt to represent the truth of wartime experience through recourse to the ordinary transcended the documentary genre. Feature films such as *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *In Which We Serve* (1942) sold the heroism of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances back to a mass cinema audience. In so doing, as Jo Fox explains, they placed ‘the image of the ordinary within the master narrative of the people’s war.’² Film historian James Chapman notes that ‘The most celebrated films of the war are undoubtedly those which give a sober realistic portrait of ordinary people.’³

In this wartime context, ordinariness was located within the everyday, but was not synonymous with it. The ‘Peoples War’ provided a space within which ordinariness – as a set of values, social characteristics and emotional styles, as well as specific behaviours in particular places – was asserted and celebrated. The extreme demands of wartime seemed to colourise the ordinary and draw attention to its texture. As sociologist Victoria Robinson has recently argued, ‘the extraordinary is both embedded within and in dialogue with the mundane, rather than having a separate and unmediated existence of its own.’⁴ Such a dialogue is, of course, historically contingent. Over time the extraordinary could become ordinary and vice versa; the relationship between these categories was politically and culturally freighted in temporally determined ways.

² Jo Fox, ‘Millions like us? Accented language and the “ordinary” in British films of the Second World War’, *Journal of British Studies*, 45:4 (2006), 819–845 (quotation at 820).

³ James Chapman, ‘British Cinema and the People’s War’ in Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill eds. *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool, 1999), 60.

⁴ Victoria Robinson, ‘Reconceptualising the Mundane and the Extraordinary: A lens through which to explore transformation within women’s everyday footwear practices’ *Sociology*, 49: 5 (2015), 903–918 (quotation at 904).

The identity of the ‘ordinary person’ was also framed by context. In wartime the category was necessarily loose because its rhetorical power rested upon its inclusivity. This imprecision facilitated an easy mapping onto the new wartime identities; experiences and forms of expertise that did not always correspond to existing social structures. As the social investigative organisation Mass-Observation noted in 1942, ‘today the ordinary citizen can no longer be covered in these familiar phrases “the man-in-the-street” and “the woman-in-the-kitchen”, it is now the “man-in-uniform”, the “woman-in-the-workshop”, or vice versa.’⁵ Nonetheless roughly drawn boundaries were periodically advanced, often in order to cohere the collective identity still further. In his BBC ‘Postscript’ broadcast of 30th June 1940, writer, broadcaster and pipe-smoking Yorkshireman, J. B. Priestley, confided that ‘Sometimes I feel that you and I – all of us ordinary people – are on one side of a high fence, and on the other side...are the official and important personages: the pundits and mandarins.’⁶ For George Orwell, Englishness (if not Britishness) was itself innately ordinary; in 1941 he called for ‘a conscious open revolt by ordinary people against inefficiency, class privilege and the rule of the old.’⁷ As Chris Waters has argued, this was ‘a period in which the nation was increasingly reimagined on the site of the ordinary and everyday.’⁸

⁵ Mass-Observation, *People in Production. An Enquiry into British War Production* (London, 1942), 2.

⁶ Quoted in John Baxendale, ‘You and I – All of us ordinary people’: Representing ‘Britishness’ in Wartime’ in Hayes and Hill, *Millions Like Us*, 318.

⁷ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* (London, 1941, 1962), 59. For more on Orwell’s ‘modest celebration of ordinary Englishness’ see Robert Colls, *George Orwell. English Rebel* (Oxford, 2013), 168.

⁸ Chris Waters, ‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947–1963’ *Journal of British Studies*, 36 (April 1997), 207–238 (quotation at 210).

In this paper I focus on the immediate post-war period. What did it mean to be ordinary once the war was over, where did the boundaries of ordinariness lie and what social, cultural and political work did the category do?

Framing Ordinariness

The parameters of the ordinary cannot be taken for granted. Raymond Williams explored the complexity of the category in the second edition of his vocabulary of culture and society, *Keywords*, noting that:

The use of ordinary in such expressions as ‘ordinary people’ has a curious history and implication. What ordinary people believe can, in different contexts, mean either what ‘uneducated’ or ‘uninstructed’ people know and think, in what are then clearly seen as limited ways, or what ‘sensible’, ‘regular’, ‘decent’ people believe, as distinct from the views of some sect or of intellectuals.⁹

Writing from a later, historiographical, standpoint Raphael Samuel also noted ‘the ambiguities attaching to the notion of “ordinary people”, a coinage of the 1930s, replacing older terms such as “everyman” and “the common people.”’¹⁰

After 1945 ‘ordinary people’ were addressed and represented in intersecting ways within newspapers, popular culture, political debate, scholarly studies and historical narratives. The heroism of a loosely defined community of the ordinary underpinned retrospective accounts of Britain at war for example. Speaking to Remembrance Day crowds in 1950, the Bishop of

⁹ Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London, 1983), 225–226.

¹⁰ Raphael Samuel, *Island Stories: Unraveling Britain. Theatres of Memory, Volume II* (London, 1998), 225.

Burnley declared that it was ‘the steadfastness of the ordinary people ... that decided the issue of two world wars.’¹¹ Post-war re-construction fantasies placed ordinariness at their heart. A widespread desire to restore, or more accurately re-make, ‘ordinary life’ found a particularly striking expression in a focus on home and family.¹² The expanding genre of advice literature utilised ideas of ordinariness to facilitate the creation of a happy, home-focused, audience. Marriage guidance expert, David Mace declared that his book *Marriage Crisis* was written: ‘for ordinary folks, and I’m going to write it the way ordinary folks will understand. If some of my friends think this is undignified, I can’t help it.’¹³ Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott addressed a gendered audience of the ordinary in a series of radio talks entitled ‘The Ordinary Devoted Mother and Her Baby’.¹⁴

The turn to ordinariness informed the production of entertainment and advertising as well as advice. Interviewed by the *Lancashire Evening Post* in May 1947, for example, radio host Wilfred Pickles explained the success of his *Have a Go!* programme, ‘I am talking to ordinary people, about ordinary things, in an ordinary way.’¹⁵ From 1946 both *Woman’s Hour* and *Housewives’ Choice* sought to cohere their audiences through an appeal to ordinariness.¹⁶ Ealing comedies such as *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (1953), *Whiskey Galore* (1949) and, of course, *Passport to Pimlico* (1949) pitted the ordinary person against

¹¹ *Burnley Express*, 15 November 1950, 1.

¹² Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann, *Life After Death. Approaches to a cultural and social history of Europe during the 1940s and 1950s* (Cambridge, 2003), 3.

¹³ David R. Mace, *Marriage Crisis* (London, 1948), 8.

¹⁴ Anne Karpf, ‘Constructing and Addressing the “Ordinary Devoted Mother”’ *History Workshop Journal*, 78 (2014), 82–106.

¹⁵ *Lancashire Evening Post*, 30 May 1947, 6.

¹⁶ Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London, 2012), 122.

officialdom; whilst a 1946 film *The Voice Within*, advertised itself baldly as ‘A powerful drama of ordinary people and a dog.’¹⁷

Within the context of austerity and scarcity, the language of ordinariness also proved useful to those advertising consumer goods. Here ordinariness was used to associate sensible good judgement with the act of shopping. For example, Robinsons Shopping Centre – ‘for the Ordinary People of the Hartlepoons’ – was advertised as ‘The Plain Store for Plain People.’¹⁸ The appeal to ordinariness was also an appeal to be trusted. The Provincial Building Society boasted that it had attracted ‘Thousands upon thousands of ordinary people who want to invest their savings to show a sure, steady profit...’¹⁹ The ‘other’ to ordinariness – expertise, celebrity – was an implicit, and sometimes explicit, presence in these kinds of appeals. So, for example, Anadin aspirin was advertised on the grounds that ‘Tens of thousands of professional people who deal daily with the problem of pain know and use ‘Anadin’... They know that ‘Anadin’, the fast and *safe* pain killer is absolutely suitable for ordinary people to use at home, at work, or wherever they happen to be’.²⁰ Adverts for Zubes cough mixture suggested that ‘Huskinness may be very glamorous in film stars, but to the ordinary person it’s neither glamorous nor comfortable.’²¹

Perhaps most significantly, the ordinary also had a salience in politics, apparently personified by Prime Minister Clement Attlee who ‘in his very ordinariness, represented the hopes of

¹⁷ *Burnley Express and Burnley News*, 21 September 1946, 1.

¹⁸ *The Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 17 January 1947, 7.

¹⁹ *The Western Daily Press and Bristol Mirror*, 16 October 1950, 1.

²⁰ *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 5 March 1953, 10.

²¹ *Sunday Post*, 3 February 1946, 7.

millions'.²² Attlee's autobiography, *As It Happened*, was described by Tom Hopkinson in *The Observer* as 'an extraordinary book, extraordinary for its unbelievable ordinariness.'²³ That Labour now claimed the mantle of ordinariness stands in contrast to the interwar period when its association with trade unionism was characterised as 'radical' and 'unordinary' by the Conservative party of Baldwin and Chamberlain.²⁴ But the postwar appeal of ordinariness spread beyond party politics to political and social education. In 1951, for example, The Hartlepool Co-operative Society's education department ran a series of lectures on 'The Life of Ordinary People in Six European Cities'²⁵ and in 1958 the *Daily Mirror* introduced its readership to 'What they are really like in Russia Today' by emphasising 'the ordinariness of these very ordinary people.'²⁶

This was not all one-way traffic. If ordinary people constituted a coherent, yet usefully nebulous, market for advice, entertainment, goods and politics, they were also of interest in their own right. The popular press sought to ventilate their views and increasingly their feelings too.²⁷ As Adrian Bingham notes 'the traditional conduit for this information was the readers' letter'; but the introduction of opinion polling just prior to the war had promised more systematic access to ordinary people's attitudes.²⁸ The most effective mobilisation of

²² David Howell, *Attlee* (London, 2006), 2.

²³ *The Observer*, 11 April, 1954, 11.

²⁴ See Ross McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880–1950* (Oxford, 1990), 289.

²⁵ *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 12 November 1951, 10.

²⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 11 September 1957, 12.

²⁷ See Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009), 97–99.

²⁸ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, 97. See also Laura Dumond Beers 'Whose Opinion?: Changing Attitudes Towards Opinion Polling in British politics, 1937–1964' *Twentieth Century British History*, 17:2 (2006), 177–205.

the ordinary was through the pages of the *Daily Mirror*, which repeatedly appealed to the ordinariness of its readers.²⁹ But the local press was the real bastion of ordinariness, with its interest in the specificities of the everyday, and commitment to cohering a place-based readership. As one reader put it: ‘Only in the Local Press which one usually finds has been built up by hard work and good journalism, can the ordinary person be free to express his opinions.’³⁰

The visibility of the ordinary in popular culture, commerce and politics both attracted, and was encouraged by, social scientists of various stripes. A research interest in ordinariness predated the Second World War but was professionalised in its aftermath. It found a particular focus in the activities of Mass Observation, whose work straddled the mid-century moment. Following the example set by Robert and Helen Lynd’s study of ‘Middletown’ (Muncie in Indiana), Mass Observation placed the ordinary – both empirically and methodologically – at the heart of a ‘science of ourselves’.³¹ Its founders harnessed the observational talents of ‘a section of people in the population who were at one and the same time ordinary, hardworking folk and also intelligent and interesting enough to want to help us’ who would ‘give an extraordinary picture of England – extraordinary, though the material they report is

²⁹ The *Daily Mirror* had, according to Donald Tyerman, editor of *The Economist*, ‘performed a revolution in communication by talking to ordinary folk in ordinary folk’s language about things ordinary folk are interested in.’ *Daily Mirror*, 11 August 1959, 9.

³⁰ *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press*, 27 July 1946, 4.

³¹ Lynd, R. S. and Lynd H. M., *Middletown. A Study in Modern American Culture* (London, 1929). In its early publication, *Britain*, Mass-Observation explained that ‘there has been much talk about the social relations of science, the need for extending the Science of Ourselves and for studying the everyday lives and feelings of ordinary people, as well as the customs of primitive people and the feelings of neurotics’. Mass-Observation, *Britain* (London, 1939), 9.

For a history of Mass-Observation see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers. A History, 1937–1949* (Oxford, 2013).

completely ordinary.’³² In fact Mass Observation’s volunteer writers were most likely to be of a lower middle-class status but a shared identity of ordinariness was used to cohere a broad church of volunteers of different, and sometimes ambiguous, class backgrounds.³³

In numerous publications and broadcasts Mass Observation emphasised its engagement with ordinary people; a 1938 radio broadcast saw Humphrey Jennings and ‘a man in the street’ discuss ‘poetry and the ordinary reader today.’³⁴ Those who reported on Mass Observation reiterated this characterisation. ‘Ordinary people watching how they themselves behave, how other people behave – a searchlight on living’ was how the *Mirror*’s ‘Cassandra’ described its early activities.³⁵ Mass Observation accumulated the views of ‘ordinary’ people in different locations throughout the war; in the latter part of the conflict it ventilated the feelings and desires of a people on the verge of peace, often explicitly contrasting these to ‘expert’ or official opinion. *An Enquiry into Peoples Homes* for example, roundly contested the view amongst planners that ‘ordinary people have no idea of what they want in housing.’³⁶ In the later 1940s and early 1950s Mass Observation continued to privilege the ordinary, whether in search of ‘the attitudes of ordinary people towards the future of the world’, in demonstrating

³² Mass Observation Archive (hereafter MOA) File Report A26, Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, ‘They Speak for Themselves’, BBC script broadcast 1 June 1939, 3; Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Mass-Observation* (London, 1937), 31.

³³ Hinton suggests that ‘many of the panel members did not think of themselves as “ordinary”. They tended to see themselves as unusual people, distinguished by their desire to self-fashion their lives free from the conventions of their social milieu.’ Hinton, *The Mass Observers*, 374.

³⁴ ‘The Poet and the Public’, 10 May 1938, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/58271ee8952a45f19712e00d52dc3ae9>

³⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 25 June 1937, 12.

³⁶ Mass-Observation, *An Enquiry into People’s Homes*, (London, 1943), 5.

‘the puzzledness of ordinary people about some of the main stabilities of the past’, or in offering advice to government on how it might best communicate with those same ‘ordinary people’.³⁷

Where Mass Observation led, post-war social science followed. As Mike Savage has demonstrated, the years after the Second World War saw sociology take a determined turn towards the ordinary, describing and categorising as it went. Women researchers were at the forefront of the new academic interest in the ordinary; interviews and surveys were their preferred method of accessing it.³⁸ Pearl Jephcott subtitled *Rising Twenty* – her study of young women in their late teens – *notes on some ordinary girls*, explaining that:

The girls are quite ordinary people, distinguished by no one characteristic except that in March 1945 they were all over 17 and under 21. ‘Typical’ is a dangerous label; but to a casual observer these particular girls seem to bear a family likeness to their million and a half contemporaries in England and Wales, and seem more or less birds of a feather with the other girls of their immediate localities. They also, on occasion, display much the same emotions and behave remarkably like certain of their predecessors to whom literature has given immortality.³⁹

³⁷ MOA, File Report 2397, ‘Second Report from Mass-Observation on World Organization and the Future’, June 1946, 1; Mass-Observation, *Puzzled People* (London, 1947), 12; MOA, File Report 2462, ‘The Language of Leadership’, March 1947.

³⁸ Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, 244.

³⁹ Pearl Jephcott, *Rising Twenty. Notes on Some Ordinary Girls* (London, 1948), 19.

A decade later, Elizabeth Bott's study of *Family and Social Networks* focused explicitly on 'ordinary urban families.'⁴⁰ Her criteria were expansive; for Bott ordinariness 'had no class connotations.'⁴¹ Margaret Stacey also championed 'a sociology of the ordinary': 'Because I really thought we needed some empirical data about how "ordinary people" lived – not these categories who were presenting social problems.'⁴² She was more specific in her 1960 study of *Tradition and Change in an English Town* identifying the 'ordinary' as one of three status groups within the Banbury working class (alongside the 'rough' and the 'respectable').⁴³

And yet the claim to ordinariness did not map seamlessly on to existing social distinctions: it was an affective as well as an economic position. As we have already seen, J. B. Priestley described himself as an ordinary person; so did Eton-educated Colonel Clifton Brown, speaker of the House of Commons. 'I don't pretend to have any great qualities. I am just an ordinary person; but, I hope, a very human one', he was quoted as saying in 1945.⁴⁴ But who else laid claim to the identity or had it bestowed upon them? In the words of Labour MP, Eric Heffer, 'Who the hell are ordinary people?'⁴⁵ In 1949, the apparent ordinariness of those attending a communist meeting in the Chapeltown district of Leeds proved puzzling to a *Yorkshire Post* reporter. He reported that the gathering included 'shop assistants, housewives, typists, a chemist, a school teacher, an insurance agent, a scientist and a number of ordinary

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Bott, *Family and Social Network. Roles, Norms and External relationships in Ordinary Urban Families* (London, 1957) 8.

⁴¹ Bott, *Family and Social Network*, 10–11.

⁴² Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940*, 151.

⁴³ Margaret Stacey, *Tradition and Change. A Study of Banbury* (Oxford, 1960), 105.

⁴⁴ *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 2 August 1945, 1.

⁴⁵ House of Commons Debates, 17 February 1971, vol. 811, cc. 1852. Heffer was speaking in a debate on industrial action.

British workmen.’⁴⁶ When the *Bucks Herald* interviewed ‘ordinary people’ about their hopes for 1953, those included were ‘local people from various walks of life’, such as a scoutmaster who hoped for a new sports field, a 72-year-old villager desirous of illuminated numbers on bus-stops, a proponent of world peace and a shop-keeper with suggestions on how to improve traffic conditions.⁴⁷

Women were more likely to say that they felt ordinary than men, and were certainly more likely to be designated ordinary by others. Housewives were nearly always ‘ordinary’ and women were assumed to be housewives. So, for example, Mrs Beatrice Curtis, parliamentary candidate for the seat of Clapham in the 1950 general election was listed in the Liberal Candidates ‘Who’s Who’ as follows:

Is Bachelor of Arts of London University and has been lecturer at King’s College, London. Since 1934 an ordinary housewife. Varied war work includes National Savings, work among Belgian refugees, etc. Has been chairman of Balham and Tooting Liberal Association since 1945, was Hon. Secretary of the Balham appeal for Lord Mayor’s fund for children, and has worked hard for U.N.A.⁴⁸

The seat was won by Labour. Even the first all-woman team to climb in the Himalayas (Dr Evelyn Camrass, Monica Jackson and Elizabeth Stark) described themselves as ‘ordinary women.’⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 2 September 1949, 1.

⁴⁷ *The Bucks Herald*, 2 January 1953, 7; *Buckingham Advertiser and Free Press*, 27 July 1946, 4.

⁴⁸ MOA, Topic Collection 76, General Elections, 76-6-D, Liberal Party Election Publications, *Who’s Who of 475 Liberal Candidates Fighting the 1950 General Election* (1950).

⁴⁹ Monica Jackson and Elizabeth Stark, *Tents in the Clouds. The First Women’s Himalayan Expedition* (London, 1957).

And yet ordinariness was not necessarily a stable identity. Rather it was bestowed, performed or addressed within specific contexts for particular purposes. It was a notably prominent feature within post-war local council elections, used to denote authenticity, shared experience, local knowledge or determined advocacy. The Labour Party in Birmingham was ‘the expression of the hope and aspirations of the ordinary people: the people who perform the useful work of society’, a carefully knowing formulation that did not draw explicit attention to class difference.⁵⁰ Liberals in Hampstead preferred to act as the ordinary person’s conduit, declaring that it was ‘vital that the voice of ordinary people is heard through representatives free to speak their minds without rigid obedience to a Party Whip’.⁵¹ Conservative candidates in Leeds preferred to speak *for* the ordinary person: ‘The Conservative view of a free and better life with fewer restrictions, rising confidence and a happier outlook is the hope to-day of millions of ordinary folk.’⁵²

And Beatrice Curtis was not the only aspirant councillor to declare their own ordinariness. Standing as a Labour candidate for the electoral division of Swallowfield, Arthur P. Hogarth, used the category to assert powerful affective bonds between himself and the electorate.

I am quite an ordinary person – just like yourself – and I believe the essence of democratic government is that it should be carried out by ordinary people – just like

⁵⁰ MOA, Topic Collection 88, Local Council Elections: 1937–51, 84-1-D, Councils: Aberdeen to Bristol, ‘Birmingham City Council By-election, Labour’, 22.6.50.

⁵¹ MOA, Topic Collection 88, Local Council Elections: 1937–51, 84-1-E, Councils: Cheshire to Hornsey, ‘Liberal, Hampstead Borough Council’, 12.5.49

⁵² MOA, Topic Collection 88, Local Council Elections: 1937–51, 84-1-F, Councils: Kent to North Riding, ‘Leeds City Council, Conservative’, 1.11.47.

us. I know your problems, your hopes, your fears, because they are also my problems, my hopes, and my fears. What you want done for the happiness and well-being of your families and yourselves, I also want done for mine.⁵³

Ordinariness was deployed to build emotional bridges in other contexts too, although sometimes in ways that were barely credible. In August 1951 the *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette* claimed that when Princess Margaret ‘visits the theatre she does so as an ordinary person, usually sitting in the stalls, with a small party of friends.’⁵⁴

The identity of those excluded from the category ordinary varied according to historical moment, the purpose of categorization and the identity of those policing it. Regardless of their own, often spirited, definitional claims, politicians, journalists, ‘intellectuals’, trade unionists, business people, farmers, ‘career women’, campaigners, historians – or anyone perceived to have some kind of a public voice – could be deemed to sit beyond its parameters. According to the 1957 Wolfenden Report, prostitutes were excluded from the circle of ‘decent’ ordinariness. As Julia Laite explains, ‘The chief proprietor of the right to public space was the person who was liberally referred to as ‘the ordinary’ or the ‘normal’ decent citizen. This ‘ordinary citizen’s’ ‘sense of decency’ was conceived as under threat by prostitutes who were distinct from ‘ordinary citizens.’⁵⁵ Migrants – particularly those of West Indian, African, or South Asian origin – could also find themselves positioned outside the parameters of ordinariness. Or they were regarded as a direct threat to a ‘normal’ ordinariness

⁵³ MOA, Topic Collection 88, Local Council Elections: 1937–51, 84-1-D, Councils: Aberdeen to Bristol, ‘Berkshire County Council, Labour’, 8.3.46.

⁵⁴ *The Sunderland Echo*, 20 August 1951, 2.

⁵⁵ Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens* (London, 2011), 198.

that was implicitly designated as ‘white’. Describing a visit to Brixton in 1955, sociologist Sheila Patterson asserted that

As I turned off the main shopping street, I was immediately overcome with a sense of strangeness, almost of shock. The street was a fairly typical South London side-street, grubby and narrow, lined with cheap cafes, shabby pubs, and flashy clothing-shops. All this was normal enough. But what struck one so forcefully was that...almost everyone in sight had a coloured skin.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, within the House of Commons the identity of the ordinary person was not infrequently contested. Within the Press it was deployed inconsistently. Within popular culture it implied particular tastes. Within individual narratives it could be a claim to inclusion or a challenge to vested interests. As a post-war social category it could encompass nearly everyone or it could describe no one at all.

The Meanings of Ordinarity

In 1981, David Pocock at Sussex University reinvented Mass Observation as what was to become the Mass Observation Project. In his appeal for volunteer writers he mirrored the language of Mass Observation’s first phase, asserting that ‘the experience of “ordinary” people is of particular importance.’⁵⁷ When Sheridan, Street and Bloome subsequently

⁵⁶ Sheila Patterson, *Dark Strangers. A Study of West Indians in London* (London, 1963), 1.

⁵⁷ Dorothy Sheridan, Brian Street and David Bloome, *Writing Ourselves. Mass-Observation and Literacy Practices* (Cresskill NJ, 2000), 48.

interviewed Mass Observation Project volunteers in the early 1990s about their writing practices few failed to claim ordinariness as a subject position.⁵⁸ One woman explained that:

I don't think ordinary people get the same chance as many perhaps academics, or so-called educated people, and people in the media, to have their say.... I think ordinary really, you think of yourself as someone who hasn't perhaps achieved fame, or great success; just live a sort of normal, everyday life, going to work and with your family.⁵⁹

For individuals such as this, the ordinary person was defined as much by who they were not, as by whom they were. Anyone whose voice went unheard within public life seemed to qualify, introducing a stark public-private dimension to the category. As Sheridan and her co-authors concluded, 'there is a sense in which being defined as "ordinary" is vague, more of a place holder waiting on how each writer will define it, rather than a given definition, "Its very difficult really; I don't think anybody's really ordinary" (M1498 interview)'.⁶⁰

Within the immediate post-war period, however, ordinariness was less a 'place holder' and more an assertion of a (flexible) set of desirable traits. A range of values, styles, and specific behaviours gave meaning to the claim to ordinariness, even if the precise identity of the ordinary person was somewhat elusive. So, for example, a reader of the *Gloucester Citizen* sought to distinguish between the political and the ordinary in a contribution to the letters page in 1949:

⁵⁸ Sheridan et al, *Writing Ourselves*, 214.

⁵⁹ Sheridan et al, *Writing Ourselves*, 174.

⁶⁰ Sheridan et al, *Writing Ourselves*, 218.

How can we define the “ordinary” from the “political.” Let’s take the ordinary people first: they are easier, because I flatter myself that I’m one of them. All the ordinary people want, I believe, are three things – Happiness, Contentment and Security... And of the political people? Simply that God forgot to put the power into their warped brains. So they mingle about with the ordinary people making them as miserable as themselves.⁶¹

The values most often ascribed to the ordinary person were decency and common sense, although kindness, authenticity, trustworthiness and transparency were also frequently advanced as defining characteristics.⁶² In 1948 Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin told the Miners’ conference at Whitley Bay that ‘It is Moonshine that foreign affairs are something above the heads of ordinary people and a job for very clever diplomats... Foreign affairs is common sense people hoping to talk to other common sense people.’⁶³ Reporting on the Burgess and Maclean scandal in 1955, the *Daily Mirror* launched a scathing attack on the Foreign Office, ‘crammed with intellectuals, the Old School Tie brigade, long-haired experts and the people-who-know-the-best people – have taken a mighty drop in the estimation of the very ordinary men and women of Britain who are armed with just a little bit of common

⁶¹ *Gloucester Citizen*, 22 July 1948, 4.

⁶² In his study of discourses of race and nation, Chris Waters argues that ‘it was largely in the 1930s and 1940s that Britons were reinvented as members of an essentially unassuming nation, a quiet, private, and ordinary people, defined by their modesty, kindness to others, loyalty, truthfulness, straightforwardness, and simplicity.’ Waters, ‘Dark Strangers in Our Midst’, 211.

⁶³ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 7 July 1948, 1.

sense and caution.⁶⁴ Regardless of whether it was being addressed, quantified or represented, ordinariness was always a value-laden category.

The public assertion of ordinariness had other meanings too. When Grace Jones – wife of convicted murderer Arthur – was interviewed by the press, she sought moral sanctuary in the category. ‘I shall not change my name – my very ordinary name’, she was quoted as saying. ‘We were a very ordinary, happy family before all this horror began – as ordinary as thousands of Joneses... The only way I can rebuild our lives is to get back to ordinariness again – and I hope my ordinary name will help me.’⁶⁵ When a twenty five year old ‘hotel servant’ appeared in court on the charge of receiving a stolen typewriter, his lawyer argued that his client ‘had not from the very beginning of his life, had an ordinary person’s life.’⁶⁶ Here an absence of ordinariness served as mitigation. The accused was sentenced to one year in prison nonetheless.

The contours of the ‘ordinary person’s’ life were increasingly homogenized in the post-war years, although perhaps not quite to the extent that one woman assumed when she attempted to sell a wedding dress, that ‘will fit ordinary size person’.⁶⁷ In the 1980s Michael Anderson drew attention to a mid-twentieth century ‘modern life cycle’, ‘which had a number of clearly demarcated stages through which most of the population passed within a relatively narrow band of ages.’⁶⁸ Laura King has more recently demonstrated that a post-war ‘focus on the

⁶⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 20 September 1955, 1.

⁶⁵ *Daily Mirror*, 29 June 1961, 2.

⁶⁶ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 22 June 1950, 6.

⁶⁷ *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, 2 January 1948, 1.

⁶⁸ Michael Anderson, ‘The Emergence of the Modern Life Cycle in Britain’, *Social History*, 10:1 (1985), 69–87 (quotation at 69).

“ordinary family” in newspapers and films, and to an extent, literature, created a rhetoric of homogeneity in terms of the experiences of different social groups, even where differences between parts of society remained.⁶⁹ For those believed not to fit this model – by dint of sexuality or ‘race’ for example – ordinariness was more difficult to claim. Nonetheless in post-war Britain being ordinary was always more freighted than simply a description of being average or representative.

A crucial element was, of course the relationship between ordinariness and social class. ‘I’m an ordinary woman’, declared Celia Johnson’s Laura in the 1945 David Lean film *Brief Encounter*; a claim that surely reflected the film’s origins as a 1936 Noel Coward play. Laura Jesson’s ordinariness speaks of Virginia Woolf’s attention to ‘an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’ or to interwar radio programmes such as ‘Music and the Ordinary Listener’ in which ‘Twelve little-known and seldom heard Overtures by Handel will be analysed at the piano and then played on the harpsichord.’⁷⁰ It is a notion of the ordinary rooted in middle class suburban life. But in the wake of a ‘People’s War’ ordinariness was increasingly located in the tastes and experiences of the British working class. As Selina Todd suggests of this period, ‘the working class became normative in Britain: they became ‘ordinary’’.⁷¹ Indeed Mike Savage has shown that ordinariness did important class-work in the years that followed the war, providing a coded framework within which social identity could be messy,

⁶⁹ Laura King, *Family Men. Fatherhood and Masculinity in Britain, 1914–1960* (Oxford, 2015), 196.

⁷⁰ Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf, The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, (London, 2010), 8; ‘Music and the Ordinary Listener’, 7 May 1929, <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/b1446a0769bf4a259c4395b9924b1799>

⁷¹ Selina Todd, ‘Class, experience and Britain’s twentieth century’, *Social History*, 39:4 (2014), 489–508 (quotation at 501).

contingent and apparently self-evident.⁷² In his analysis of Goldthorpe and Lockwood's Luton-based 'Affluent Worker' interviews of the early 1960s, Savage identifies the pervasiveness of the self-identity 'ordinary'⁷³: 'The working class comprises normal, authentic people. By differentiating it from a public upper-class elite, respondents could see themselves as ordinary people devoid of social distinction.'⁷⁴ Yet, as we have already seen, assertions of ordinariness did gender-work as well as class-work. In further analysis of the same material, Jon Lawrence shows that the claim to ordinariness and authenticity by male interviewees – alongside a rejection of snobbery – underpinned a particular way of 'doing masculinity' which had powerful cross-class purchase within the interview situation.⁷⁵

The Uses of Ordinariness

According to the anthropologist of modern France, Catherine Neveu, contemporary use of the socio-political category 'ordinary citizen' often signals a non-political or uninvolved individual 'seen as more independent and detached than those involved in collective spaces or debates, and their opinions as more genuine, more "authentic" and less biased, since they

⁷² Working on a slightly later period Sam Wetherall has shown how the terms 'ordinary' and 'working class' were used interchangeably by community artists of the 1970s who framed a dichotomy between 'posh' and 'ordinary' art and who searched for 'a set of ordinary class-based experiences around which art could be made...' Sam Wetherell, 'Painting the Crisis: Community Arts and the Search for the 'Ordinary' in 1970s and '80s London', *History Workshop Journal*, 76 (2013), 235–249 (quotation at 242).

⁷³ Mike Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s: Revisiting the Affluent Worker Study', *Sociology* 39:5 (2005), 929–946 (quotation at 93).

⁷⁴ Savage, 'Working-class Identities in the 1960s', 938.

⁷⁵ Jon Lawrence, 'Social-Science Encounters and the Negotiation of Difference in early 1960s England', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2013), 215–239 (quotation at 234).

are not supposed to be structured by the corporate interest or opinions or organised groups or collectives.’⁷⁶ John Clarke suggests that in contemporary Britain:

...ordinary people are valorised *because they are not political*. They are seen as occupying positions that are above or below politics: below, because they are seen to be concerned with more “everyday” issues; above, because they are not engaged in the venal, corrupt or collusive pursuit of power and self interest in the manner of politicians.⁷⁷

Dominic Sandbrook draws on these contemporary uses in his histories of postwar Britain, regularly employing the ‘ordinary person’ as a counterweight to notions of a politicised population. For Sandbrook ordinary people in the past are nearly always conservative and almost always uninterested in effecting change. In concluding a chapter on Cold War politics, for example, he claims that ‘For all the fuss about the special relationship, or banning the bomb, or Skybolt, or nuclear testing, or the madness of modern science, it ultimately tuned out that to most ordinary people there were a lot of better things to worry about.’⁷⁸ In this usage, ordinary people do work for historical interpretation simply by dint of being ‘ordinary’.

⁷⁶ Catherine Neveu, ‘Of ordinariness and citizenship processes’, *Citizenship Studies*, 19:2 (2015), 141–154 (quotation at 141).

⁷⁷ John Clarke, ‘Enrolling Ordinary People: Governmental Strategies and the Avoidance of Politics’, *Citizenship Studies*, 16:6 (2010), 637–650 (quotation at 642).

⁷⁸ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good. A History of Britain From Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005), 259.

And yet as Neveu also argues, ordinariness has a ‘politicising potential’: “‘working through the ordinary” can allow us to grasp less conventional reworking’s of citizenship...’⁷⁹

Matthew Hilton has recently argued for the making-ordinary of British politics in his study of post-war Non-governmental Organisations.⁸⁰ For Hilton, NGOs transformed the meaning of politics by targeting specific ‘ordinary’ – or more accurately everyday – issues. In this reading ‘ordinary politics’ is single-issue politics mobilised by professional, technical experts engaging a predominantly middle-class citizenry of concerned individuals.⁸¹ But if politics was ordinary in post-war Britain, then ordinariness was also political. As we have already seen, the subject position ‘ordinary person’ had significant political purchase coming out of the Second World War. In post-war Britain intervening as an ordinary person legitimated both opinion and knowledge claims. As a social category, the ordinary performed significant political work in terms of defining, cohering and excluding; it re-calibrated the extraordinary as it went. If ordinariness was defined in opposition to learned expertise, political power, and possession of a public voice, then these categories were themselves shaped by the developing character of ordinariness.

Ordinariness was a powerful position from which to resist and to challenge authority, to assert rights and to make demands. Crucially it provided an individual – yet implicitly collective – counterpoint to various manifestations of ‘the expert.’ A growth in the authority of the expert has long been seen as a characteristic of twentieth-century Britain. For Guy Ortolano, amongst others, the period 1945–c.1975 was a ‘meritocratic moment’; a period in

⁷⁹ Neveu, ‘Of ordinariness and citizenship processes’, 141.

⁸⁰ Matthew Hilton, ‘Politics is Ordinary: Non-governmental Organizations and Political Participation in Contemporary Britain’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 22:2 (2011), 230–268.

⁸¹ Hilton, ‘Politics is Ordinary’, 235.

which the ideal citizen was the expert citizen.⁸² And yet, trust in expertise was not unconditional, particularly where it was brought to bear on the everyday and came into conflict with the authority of experience. Whether in relation to childcare practices, home design or emotional intimacy, the opinion of the expert – or ‘official’ – was consistently challenged and sometimes actively rejected.⁸³ The relationship between the ordinary person and ‘authority’ was explicitly exploited by the Conservative Party’s ‘Trust the People’ exhibition of 1947. As Mass Observation reported, ‘The most popular exhibit is on the first floor – a desk with about a dozen telephones. Over the desk is this poster, ‘Listen to the voice of Authority’. You pick up the receiver and listen-in to a conversation between Bureaucracy and the ordinary man-in-the street showing how he is hedged and hampered on all sides by officialdom and Red Tape.’⁸⁴

The public assertion of ordinariness had a power beyond resistance to state interference. The ordinary person was both non-expert and most expert: ordinariness and expertise were not necessarily oppositional. Lived experience and feeling were set against acquired knowledge and training in all manner of areas including domestic and local issues, national politics and international relations. For example, when interviewed about the *Daily Herald Post-war Homes Exhibition* in July 1945, female visitors critiqued what they saw on the basis of their experience, and feelings, as ‘ordinary’ women:

⁸² Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy. Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2009), 17–18.

⁸³ Claire Langhamer, ‘Everyday advice on everyday love: romantic expertise in mid-twentieth century Britain’, *L’Homme, European Journal of Feminist History*, 24:1 (2013).

⁸⁴ Sheridan and Calder, *Speak For Yourself: a Mass-Observation Anthology 1937–1949* (Oxford, 1985), 236.

I thought I'd see a whole house – but I just didn't. I didn't bother with the little models. They're not a scrap of use to the ordinary person. What do I know about scale and measurement? I like to see the house and walk round it, and then I'll tell you if I like it or don't.⁸⁵

A frustrated traveller on the overcrowded Dundee to St Andrews train service sought to deploy his own lived expertise to solve an apparently intractable problem: 'To the ordinary person the solution seems to be to put the 4.55 train back until after five o'clock, and leave the 5.44 train for long distance passengers.'⁸⁶ Those who confided in Mass Observation deployed their ordinariness as a defence against renewed war – 'We ordinary people must hang together more and see that what we want we get' – and as a subject position from which to critique the direction of science: 'I am only an ordinary man, but if I can see such a misdirection of scientific research, surely those who have been trained and educated to view these problems with a keener intellect than I can see it?'⁸⁷

Increasingly being an ordinary person was deemed to be a form of expertise in its own right. The importance of finding a place for the ordinary person on government committees and investigations was not infrequently asserted in House of Commons debates. 'Will there be any ordinary people on the committee?' asked Godfrey Nicholson in a Commons discussion of a transport users' committee for London.⁸⁸ The *Daily Mirror*, perhaps unsurprisingly, went further. In a damning critique of the *Report of the Royal Commission on Marriage and*

⁸⁵ MOA, File Report 2270B, 'First Report on the Post-War Homes Exhibition', July 1945, 7.

⁸⁶ *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, 9th November 1945, 2.

⁸⁷ MOA, File Report 2370 'World Organisation and the Future', March 1946, 27; MOA, File Report 2474B, 'Scientists – Magicians or Monsters?', April 1947, 8.

⁸⁸ House of Commons Debates, 21 February 1949, vol. 462, cc1590.

Divorce published in 1956 it asserted that ‘The only worthwhile results would come not from a Royal Commission – but from an ordinary Commission of ordinary folk reporting on married life as they see it, and live it. For the human race goes on being human – with its own common sense outlook – though Royal Commissions come and go.’⁸⁹

The figure of the ordinary person was used across the political spectrum both to bestow everyday authority upon political interventions and to claim that specific concerns were matters of general interest. And yet the ordinary person was not always deemed capable of speaking for himself or herself. The period was replete in ventriloquists who projected their own voice through that of the ordinary person in order to speak on their behalf. So, for example when pipe-smoking local councillor W. D. Reid proposed an end to the smoking ban in Aberdeen Art Gallery he spoke on behalf of the ordinary person: ‘I have always felt that the Art Gallery, in its general outlook, is repellent to the ordinary person’, he told the local newspaper suggesting that ‘If smoking were permitted it would make the place more attractive and more useful to the community.’⁹⁰ In the midst of the post-war death penalty debate Cicely M. Craven of the Howard League for Penal Reform wrote to *The Times* that: ‘The ordinary citizen hates the whole business of the death sentence, the condemned cell, the hanging and the morbid sympathy with the murderer that it arouses.’⁹¹

As might be expected, the popular press saw itself as particularly well placed to act as a conduit for ordinary opinion, or at least to claim that it was doing so. When Nikita Krushchev pulled out of a Summit meeting in August 1958 the *Daily Mirror* suggested that ‘The

⁸⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 22 March 1956, 2.

⁹⁰ *Aberdeen Journal*, 13 April 1946, 4.

⁹¹ *The Times*, 22 November, 1947, 5.

ordinary people of the world are bitterly disappointed.’⁹² But the *Mirror* was not alone in internationalising ordinariness. An American representative on the Council of the United Nations World Federation told a church audience in Sunderland that ‘Peace for the future lies in the hands of millions of ordinary people all over the world lending their full support to the United Nations Association and so influencing their national policies and directing their statesmen.’⁹³ According to Anthony Eden speaking in 1948, ‘In every land the ordinary people yearn for a period of tranquillity’, offering the possibility of an international community of peace-loving ordinary people, a model that perhaps chimed with early interpretations of the atrocities committed during the Second World War which foregrounded the culpability of leaders over the led.⁹⁴ In a small but telling way telephone operator Sheila Brown – winner of a 1954 *Picture Post* competition – asserted that her life’s ambition was ‘to own a horse-drawn caravan and to amble along indefinitely throughout Europe meeting ordinary people.’⁹⁵ The internationalism of ordinariness was, ultimately, a form of ‘imagined community’; the claim to ordinariness was an assertion of a collectivity that transcended national boundaries.⁹⁶ As Ben Highmore has put it, ‘the ordinary brings with it one of the

⁹² *Daily Mirror*, 7 August 1958, 1.

⁹³ *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, 30 September 1946, 3.

⁹⁴ *Gloucestershire Echo*, 14 August 1948, 1. Within the historiography of Germany, attempts to explain the events of the 1930s and 1940s have increasingly focused upon psychological and/or ideological explanations for the violence and murders perpetrated by ‘ordinary men’ or ‘ordinary Germans’. For an overview see Richard Overy, “‘Ordinary Men’”, *Extraordinary Circumstances: historian, social psychology and the Holocaust*, *Journal of Social Issues*, 70:3 (2014), 515–530. Key texts include Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992); Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996). See also Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939–45* (London, 2015).

⁹⁵ *Picture Post*, 1 May 1954, 47.

⁹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

most optimistic but also most daunting phrases from science fiction and horror: you are not alone.’⁹⁷

Conclusion

The Queen’s 1954 Christmas day speech was dedicated to ‘the great bulk of ordinary citizens’ and ‘the average men and women’. She sent,

a special message of encouragement and good cheer to those of you whose lot is cast in dull and unenvied surroundings, to those whose names will never be household words, but to whose work and loyalty we owe so much. May you be proud to remember – as I am myself – how much depends on you and that even when your life seems most monotonous what you do is always of real value and importance to your fellow men.

In reporting the Queen’s words the *Daily Mail* added portentously, ‘And of course we are a nation of ordinary people’.⁹⁸

Nonetheless the post-war valorisation of ordinariness had its critics as well as its supporters. When Noel Coward poked fun at the ordinary in a lyrical assault on the Festival of Britain – ‘We’re proud to say/ In every way/ We’re ordinary folk’ – he was not a lone voice.⁹⁹ Ann Temple, the *Daily Mail*’s agony aunt, railed against ‘domestic ordinariness’ – as did, for different reasons, those characterised as ‘angry young men’. Bernard Buckham in the *Daily*

⁹⁷ Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives. Studies in the Everyday* (London, 2011), 5.

⁹⁸ *Daily Mail*, 28 December 1954, 1.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Alan Sinfield, ‘The Government, the People and the Festival’, in Jim Fyrth ed. *Labour’s Promised Land? Culture and Society in Labour Britain 1945–51* (London, 1995), 181.

Mirror asserted that ‘This idea which is always cropping up in different directions that you want a lot of ordinary or average people on the air is, to my mind, a complete fallacy.’¹⁰⁰

Certainly by the 1960s the ordinary could be as much something to escape – imaginatively or literally – as something to embrace. Valerie Walkerdine puts it well in her retrospective account of growing up working class in post-war Derby: ‘...everything about it, its sense of safety, had felt for so long like a trap, the site and origin of an ordinariness both hated and desired. It was the place in which, if I were not careful and being so vigilant, I might turn into my mother.’¹⁰¹ Shifting trends in advertising also map the transition. Beefeater gin was not an ordinary gin; rather it was ‘A gin to be proud of.’¹⁰² In the *Daily Mirror*, the Cassandra column warned of the political perils of ordinariness. Prime Minister Harold Wilson ‘was in danger of being the victim of the cult of domestic ordinariness’.¹⁰³ Mrs Wilson was a particular target: ‘Every time she speaks the bells of ordinariness begin to chime.’ Some readers agreed. ‘I deplore the modern practice of trying to make ordinariness a virtue’ wrote R. Smith from London.¹⁰⁴

Nonetheless ordinariness retained sufficient political purchase at the end of the sixties to be deployed by Enoch Powell in his 1968 ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech.¹⁰⁵ Setting a rhetorical precedent recently echoed by Nigel Farage, Powell placed the views of a ‘decent, ordinary

¹⁰⁰ *Daily Mail*, 8 February 1954, 6; *Daily Mirror*, 13 June 1945, 7.

¹⁰¹ Valerie Walkerdine, ‘Dreams from an Ordinary Childhood’, in Liz Heron ed., *Truth, Dare or Promise. Girls Growing up in the Fifties* (London, 1995), 63–77 (quotation at 63).

¹⁰² *Daily Mirror*, 11 November 1968, 22.

¹⁰³ *Daily Mirror*, 20 November 1964, 10.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 26 November 1964, 6.

¹⁰⁵ On Powell see Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

fellow Englishman' at the centre of his particular brand of racism. As Amy Whipple has demonstrated, ordinariness was a subject position adopted by many of Powell's supporters.¹⁰⁶ But it was also harnessed in the fight of Black Britons against racial discrimination: 'We have the right to be ordinary citizens of Britain' asserted Marion Glean in 1964.¹⁰⁷

In this paper I have argued that postwar ordinariness was a powerful, yet mutable, category that was widely harnessed as a distinctive social and political standpoint. If ordinariness has more recently been defined by what it apparently is not – political, expert, influential – then in the years immediately following the Second World War it was defined by what it apparently was. Although as a category it was malleable and messy, ordinariness was nonetheless held to denote specific values, emotional styles and social behaviours. It also had clear political uses. It operated as a particularly powerful position from which to mount an individual, and collective, critique of 'the expert'. But it was also, itself, a form of expertise.

It is, perhaps, the loose malleability of the category which explains its appeal to historians writing the past today. Over recent years there has been a noticeable turn to the ordinary in history as well as other disciplines.¹⁰⁸ Sometimes the ordinary is conceptualised as distinct from the everyday, at other times the two are conflated, although as literary scholar Lorraine

¹⁰⁶ Amy Whipple, 'Revisiting the "Rivers of Blood" Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell', *Journal of British Studies*, 48:3 (2009), 717–735.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me. Black Britons, Citizenship, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2015), 190.

¹⁰⁸ Two of the most interesting interventions from anthropology and cultural studies respectively are Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham and London, 2007) and Ben Highmore, *Ordinary Lives. Studies in the Everyday* (London, 2011).

Sims advises ‘Something can be ordinary without being everyday.’¹⁰⁹ An appetite has emerged for ‘ordinary sources’ – in part defined as those that facilitate access to ordinary lives, in part defined by their very nature as ordinary.¹¹⁰ And ‘ordinary people’ – sometimes encased by inverted commas although increasingly not – populate our histories across time and place. Yet as historians we might do well to remember that, to quote Neveu, ‘“ordinariness” cannot be defined per se, or *in abstracto*...no situation, site, practice or individual is “ordinary” in itself.’¹¹¹

I want to end by suggesting that our use of the category today might be strengthened if we have a clearer sense of its use as a social descriptor in the past. Who do we mean when we refer to ordinary people and who did the people we study mean? Given its definitional contingency, can ordinariness ever be a stable subject position? In this paper I have argued that what appears to be a straightforward social history category is actually a slippery, deeply politicised, often fought-over and dynamic identity; one which people moved in and out of according to context. And, most importantly, that it was, and remains, a category with real political purchase. Perhaps, then, a little more definitional precision, allied to an enhanced understanding of the historically situated meanings of ordinariness, is needed if the description ‘ordinary people’ is to retain its analytical power.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Lorraine Sim, *Virginia Woolf, The Patterns of Ordinary Experience*, (London, 2010), 2.

¹¹⁰ Jennifer Sinor, *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray’s Diary* (Iowa City, 2002), 5–6.

¹¹¹ Catherine Neveu, ‘Of Ordinariness and Citizenship Processes’ *Citizenship Studies*, 19:2 (2015), 141–154 (quotation at 148).

¹¹² And here I am critiquing my own use of the category, as much as anyone else’s.