


Defining Dangerous Dogs: Breed, Class, and Masculinity

Claire Parkinson

Edge Hill University, United Kingdom

claire.parkinson@edgehill.ac.uk

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Abstract. This article examines historical connections between social class, masculinity, and dog breeds in British culture. It gives an account of the nineteenth and twentieth century origins of the pit bull terrier and Staffordshire bull terrier, and the dogs' links to masculine identity, working class culture and practices. It examines the introduction of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, UK legislation intended to protect the public from dangerous dogs. Through an examination of the discursive framing of pit bulls, this article argues that there are historical continuities that connect social class with specific dog types, and these associations have informed legislative decision-making. Analysing media and political discourses, this article establishes how the relationship between class identity and breed shaped the public and political debate on dangerous dogs and impacts the material reality of dogs' lives.

Key Words: dog, breed-specific legislation, pit bull terrier, masculinity, class

Definirati nevarne pse: pasma, razred in moškost

Povzetek. Članek obravnava zgodovinske povezave med družbenim razredom, moškostjo in pasmami psov v britanski kulturi. Predstavi izvor pitbul terierja in staffordshirskega bulterierja v devetnajstem ter dvajsetem stoletju in povezave med psi, maskulino identiteto ter kulturo in praksami delavskega razreda. Preučí uvedbo Zakona o nevarnih psih (Dangerous Dogs Act 1991), zakonodajo Združenega kraljestva, katere namen je zaščititi javnost pred nevarnimi psi. S pomočjo diskurzivnega uokvirjanja pitbulov članek pokaže, da obstajajo zgodovinske kontinuitete, ki družbeni razred povezujejo z določenimi vrstami psov, te povezave pa so bile podlaga za sprejemanje zakonodajnih odločitev. Z analizo medijskih in političnih diskurzov ugotavljamo, kako je razmerje med razredno identiteto in pasmo oblikovalo javno in politično razpravo o nevarnih psih ter vplivalo na materialno resničnost pasjih življenj.

Ključne besede: pes, zakonodaja za določene pasme, pitbul terier, moškost, razred

In the latter decade of the twentieth century, pit bulls and their owners were the focus of breed-specific legislation in the form of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and constructed by media and governmental discourses as deviant. Following a series of widely reported dog attacks in the UK, dangerous dogs legislation focused on the pit bull terrier. News articles referred to pit bulls as ‘devil dogs’ and across the political spectrum there were calls for a breed ban (Molloy 2011a). Through news media narratives, pit bulls became strongly associated with drug culture, violence, deviant masculinity, and a rise in illegal dog fighting. There were an estimated 10,000 pit bulls in the UK when the 1991 Act was introduced, although how many of these were family pets with no history of aggression, how many had been involved in dog attacks, and how many were involved in dog fighting was unknown as no reliable records existed (Molloy 2011b). Instead, media reporting on dog attacks was used by government and the public as a proxy for quantitative evidence.

This article argues that the vilification of certain types of dogs, used to allay public concerns about dog risk in general, has relied on discourses that connect breed, class identity, and forms of masculinised deviance. Media reporting has amplified this discourse, shaping public and political debate on the topic of pit bulls, and dangerous dogs more generally. A consequence of this strategy is that breed-specific legislation fails because it has been informed by identity politics, and problematic notions about ‘breed’ which rely on institutional methods of standardisation developed in the nineteenth century. Previous studies have established that, during the nineteenth century, the introduction and regulation of dog classification into breeds was intrinsically bound up with ideas about class, gender, and race (Ritvo 1987; McHugh 2004; Brandow 2016; Worboys, Strange, and Pemberton 2018; Pearson 2021). Concurrent with the formalisation of breeds, the later decades of the nineteenth century were also an important time in the development of the pit bull terrier, a type of dog that originated in the UK and was exported to the US in the 1860s.

There has been academic interest in contemporary relationships between dog fighting and masculinities (Walliss 2023; Nurse 2021) and, specific to the topic of this article, the pit bull terrier and identity politics (Molloy 2011a; 2011b; Harding 2012; McCarthy 2016). There is, however, a lack of studies that explore the history of the UK origins and development of the pit bull, dog fighting and their links to working class identity, a gap which this article aims to fill. More recent studies have focused on the US context (Weaver 2021; Guenther 2020a; 2020b; Arluke and Rowan

2020; Alonso-Recarte 2020) where, unlike the UK which has national legislation that prohibits pit bull terriers, there is no equivalent federal or state breed-specific legislation (BSL). Instead, where they exist, US breed laws are enacted by individual cities, American Indian reservations, and military facilities. Not only are there differences in the enactment of legislation, the social and cultural contexts of the US and UK differ with a concomitant variance in the experience of breed, gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and nation. This article, therefore, contributes to scholarship on inter-relations between humans and dogs to examine intersections between class, gender, and the symbolic capital of breed within a UK context. Moreover, intersectionality, in this article, is informed by a critical animal studies perspective which draws attention to the ways in which the symbolic and material exploitation of animals maintains and is maintained by dominant categories of class, race, and gender (Taylor and Twine 2014, 4).

Starting with the late nineteenth century, this article traces the development of the pit bull terrier and Staffordshire bull terrier, and maps intersections with changing ideas about class and masculinity. It then examines the introduction of UK breed-specific legislation in the twentieth century. Although media and political discourses assert that breed-specific legislation protects the public from dangerous dogs (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2009, 2), this article argues that the legislation on dangerous dogs is flawed. Through an examination of the discursive framing of certain dogs, it proposes that there are historical continuities that connect social class with specific dog types, and these continued associations have shaped public debate and legislative decision-making. This strategy is used to calm public anxieties about dog risk but does not address key issues such as unregulated dog breeding and poor understanding of dog communication and behaviours.¹ For instance, poor breeding practices have detrimental effects on the long-term health and behaviours of dogs (British Veterinary Association 2023) and, in the UK, most bites occur in the home whilst interacting with a dog known to the adult or child who has been bitten (Jakeman et al. 2020). Whilst, in general, dog bites are contextual and multifacto-

¹ There is a licencing system for those breeding three or more litters per year. So-called 'hobby breeders' (those breeding less than three litters per year) remain unregulated. For further discussion about public understanding of dog communication and behaviours see Parkinson, Herring, and Gould (2023).

rial, a lack of understanding of a dog's specie-specific body language and communication is often a major aspect of such incidents (Jakeman et al. 2020, 3–5).

However, addressing breeding practices and the widespread lack of understanding of dog behaviours and communication would impact the normalised commodification of dogs and generalised practices of 'pet ownership'. As Gary Francione has pointed out, animal welfare laws tend not to affect the interests of humans while exploitation is normalised through a system that classifies dogs and other animals as property. Francione argues: 'because animals are our property, the law will require their interests to be observed only to the extent that it facilitates the exploitation of the animal' (Francione 2008, 43). As such, increasing numbers of dog attacks which stem from factors such as unregulated breeding, and 'pet ownership' practices which do not recognise the specie-specific behaviours and interests of dogs, remain untroubled by any meaningful intervention, legislative or otherwise. Given this context for intervention, this article establishes how a relationship between class identity and breed has informed public and political debate and resulted in significant impacts for the material reality of dogs' lives, while legislation remains ineffective at tackling the issue of dog attacks and dog bite fatalities.

Breed, Gender and Class

In British culture, dogs have been companions to humans for centuries, but it is only since the nineteenth century that the concept of 'breed' came to define and classify the modern dog (Brandow 2016; Worboys, Strange, and Pemberton 2018; Pearson 2021). The invention of breed emerged from Victorian values and ideas about class and gender, influenced by new thinking about evolution, industrialisation, and commerce (Ritvo 1987; Worboys, Strange, and Pemberton 2018, 7). In this sense, breed was and continues to be an idealised construction imposed onto the bodies and behaviours of dogs to organise their appearance and temperament into classificatory groups that satisfy the interests of humans according to varying aesthetic whims and functional requirements. Although perhaps self-evident, it is nonetheless worthwhile pointing out that the concept of breed does not, in any way, recognise the interests of dogs. The first breed standards – classifications that detail the look and character of each breed – were written in the 1860s and these became the blueprints by which pedigree dogs were, and continue to be, judged at conformation dog shows.

In the UK, contemporary breed standards are owned by The Kennel Club. Reviewed and updated to take account of changes to breeds over time, the standard serves as a guideline to the ideal characteristics, appearance, and temperament. Each breed standard includes sections on general appearance, characteristics, and temperament, followed by more detailed descriptions of the ideal head and skull, eyes, ears, mouth, neck, forequarters, body, hindquarters, feet, tail, gait/movement, coat, colour, and size (The Kennel Club n.d.). When they were first introduced, breed standards functioned to organise and order the variability of nature and reflected nineteenth century concerns about purity and superiority which permeated dominant thinking about canines and humans (Pearson 2021, 31–35). These concerns were also evident in the recording of pedigrees, a form of ‘proof’, albeit sometimes disputed, of the lineage and ‘pure’ blood of a particular dog. To these ends, in 1874, the first *Kennel Club Stud Book* (Pearce 1874) was published. A huge tome at over 600 pages, Volume 1 of the *Kennel Club Stud Book* attempted to record in the first half of the book, all the prize winners at dog shows since 1859, with the second half organised by breed as a record of each individual dog’s pedigree accompanied by the names of breeders.

Since the 1860s, modern dog breeds have been associated with certain social classes, often connected to ideas about breed function and human occupation or social status, and subject to fluctuating trends and popularity. For instance, while the rural and urban poor were thought to share attributes with feral dogs, also known as ‘curs’, the classification of pure-bred dogs mirrored the Victorian preoccupation with social stratification (Howell 2012, 228; Worboys, Strange, and Pemberton 2018, 50–51). In the markedly defined class hierarchy of nineteenth century Britain, middle and upper-class fashions for dogs were often led by the royal family. Moreover, there was a clear gendering of breed types with, for example, smaller breeds of dog thought to be better suited to women and referred to as ‘ladies’ dogs.’ One commentator noted in 1896 that Yorkshire terriers had overtaken King Charles and Blenheim spaniels as the favourite ‘ladies’ dogs’ because, when it came to the trends in fashionable dogs, ‘Royalty leads the way’ (Fitzgerald 1896, 545–546). At the other end of the social spectrum, the poor and working classes expressed quite different views about what counted as a desirable dog. In his accounts of the London poor, the journalist and reformist Henry Mayhew expressed bemusement on finding that the male patrons of a London tavern who took part in rat-baiting described a white bulldog as ‘a great beauty’ (Mayhew

1861, 5). Mayhew noted that the dog had a forehead that protruded 'in a manner significant of water on the brain' had legs 'as bowed as a tailor's' and had an overall 'sore look, from its being peculiarly pink round the eyes, nose, and [...] all edges of its body' (Mayhew 1861, 5).

It is unsurprising that Mayhew held different views about dog aesthetics to those of the tavern patrons. At a time when middle-class dog fanciers were endeavouring to establish a regulated and stable system of pedigreed dog classification, the bulldog had fallen out of favour and was in decline following the ban on bull baiting in 1835. Initially considered a respectable 'sport' with aristocratic and royal patronage in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, royal support for baiting was withdrawn in the eighteenth century. But, even without royal patronage, baiting continued, the main reason being that commercial breeders of bulls, bears and dogs were from the aristocracy and the economic benefits of baiting ensured there was continued upper class support until the early nineteenth century. There was, however, a shift in the symbolic capital of dog fighting during this time. No longer the preserve of the upper classes, working-class participation in bull and bear baiting grew and, during the same period, dog fighting became prevalent.

Nineteenth century legislative reform made baiting illegal, and this forced dogfighting underground where, unlike other baiting sports, it could be conducted in relative secrecy (Evans and Forsyth 1997, 63). Although the upper classes continued to participate covertly in dog fighting, the main proponents were working class men. After baiting became illegal, those who engaged in the sport were considered deviant and dog fighting was considered a cruel and specifically working-class practice (p. 63). As a result of these shifts and the bulldog's connections to baiting, the breed had little appeal for the educated middle or upper classes. Harriet Ritvo (1987, 111) writes that the bulldog was 'a breed that had outlived its usefulness, that had no social cachet, and that appeared to ordinary dog lovers ugly, stupid and brutal.' To have bulldogs included in the newly established practices of dog exhibition, the Bulldog Club, formed to preserve the breed, had to find a way to overcome the stigma and decouple the breed from its associations with the lower classes and cruel practices. One approach was to claim that bulldogs were 'the only dog with sufficient endurance to serve the cruel purposes of depraved owners' (Ritvo 1987, 111). The rhetorical strategy worked and by 1885 the bulldog enjoyed a newfound popularity as a breed that looked powerful but was 'peaceable' (p. 111).

Pit Bull and Staffordshire Bull Terrier Origins

The pit bull terrier, which would become the focus of UK breed-specific legislation in the latter decades of the twentieth century, originated from nineteenth century bulldogs, terriers, and rat-baiting dogs, the types of dog Mayhew had encountered in taverns more than a century earlier. According to Joseph L. Colby, author of *The American Pit Bull Terrier* (1936), the first comprehensive guide to the pit bull terrier, the dog was developed for pit fighting by crossing Bulldogs and English White Terriers (Colby 1936, 14). Nineteenth-century pit bulls had the powerful head and jaws of the bulldog combined with the lithe speed of a terrier-like body.² The dogs were closely associated in the UK, and later in America – where they were renamed American pit bull terriers – with prize fighters, and tavern and saloon keepers (pp. 14–15).³ Once a favoured dog of young nineteenth century British gentlemen, they fell out of fashion following the introduction of the 1835 legislation. With the shift in Victorian middle-class sensibilities towards working-class ‘animal sports,’ gentlemen no longer wanted to be identified as ‘the owner of a battle-scarred pit dog’ and, Colby noted in 1936, ‘from the start the breed earned an unjust reputation due to his fighting ability and the character of the owner’ (p. 15).

Despite dog fighting being illegal after 1835, dog fights continued to be held in the pits of taverns and, in an industrialised area of England known as the Black Country, at ironworking foundries, forges and coal mines. Rat baiting, which was not initially enforced under the 1835 legislation, remained popular until the turn of the century and was often used as a cover for illegal dog fights, both ‘sports’ taking place in pits.⁴ Although bulldogs had been formally recognised by The Kennel Club as a breed in 1873, pit bull terrier dogs were considered ‘mongrels,’ which, as one expert explained, were crossbred dogs ‘whose antecedents may be apparent or obscure [...]’ but ‘the chances are that he bears the unmistakable stigma of his unfortunate parentage’ (Our Kennel Correspondent 1931a,

² In other accounts, the pit bull terrier is a descendent of dogs referred to as the Bulldog-Terrier and Bull-and-Terrier. See, for example, John F. Gordon (1971, 41).

³ A number of famous English pit dogs were taken to America in 1865 by dog fighting trainer ‘Cockney’ Charlie Lloyd where they were crossed with bull terrier-type dogs to produce American pit bull terriers (Gordon 1971, 42).

⁴ Impromptu dog fights would also take place during workers’ lunch breaks at foundries and mines.

17). Only pedigreed dogs from recognised breeds escaped the pejorative label of ‘mongrel.’⁵ Not only did the pit bull’s outward appearance fail to meet the standard of an elite pedigreed breed, but the dogs’ temperament was also brought into question. In 1935, *The Times* correspondent wrote about the pit bull terrier: ‘his character suited the temper of those who deplored the embargo placed by Parliament upon bull-baiting [...]’ (Our Kennel Correspondent 1935, 17). The dogs’ temperament was considered to parallel that of the owner and, due to their background as fighting dogs, pit bulls were closely associated with working-class masculine brutality.

The pit bull terrier shared origins with the type of dog that would eventually become known as the Staffordshire bull terrier, a breed recognised by The Kennel Club in 1935 with the formal establishment of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier Club. The Staffordshire bull terrier was so named in recognition of the breed’s heritage as a Black Country fighting dog. Commenting on the Staffordshire bull terrier’s transition from fighting dog to legitimate breed, *The Times* correspondent noted that the dogs had ‘out-lived a past that was disreputable in the extreme’ to ‘become an orderly member of canine society’ (Our Kennel Correspondent 1935, 17). This management of canine bodies into standardised breeds and official recognition of the Staffordshire bull terrier resulted in the pit bull falling out of favour. As interest in dog shows grew, the popularity of dog fighting diminished and pit bull numbers declined. One commentator wrote, ‘we have now too much respect for our dogs to test their mettle by encouraging them to maul and kill one another’ (Our Kennel Correspondent 1931b, 15). The, now reputable, Staffordshire bull terrier breed made their first appearance at Crufts dog show in 1936 where they received generous public attention, helped in part by the attendance of well-known actor, Tom Walls, the owner of ‘Brother of Looe,’ winner of the ‘best bitch’ award.

Although the Staffordshire bull terrier had official recognition and was regularly exhibited at dog shows, the dogs’ symbolic capital remained closely tied to working-class identity. This was made most apparent in an exchange that took place through a series of letters to the editor of *The Daily Mail* concerning which breed should be regarded as the ‘national dog of England,’ a designation that had been attributed to the bull-

⁵ However, to develop breeds and particular characteristics, it was permissible to cross-breed between pedigreed individuals and the progeny registered (Our Kennel Correspondent 1931a, 17). See also Worboys, Strange, and Pemberton (2018, 219–220).

dog since the end of the nineteenth century. Some Staffordshire bull terrier supporters tried to renegotiate the meanings attached to the dogs, claiming the breed deserved the accolade of the ‘national dog of England’ (Paget 1934, 8). Others involved in the world of pedigree dog exhibition were quick to respond, saying that even if they were classed as a distinctly British dog, the Staffordshire bull terrier was a working-class dog that had ‘changed hands so often in the “pit” or “pub”’ (Hollender 1934, 8). Working-class spaces – the pit and pub – were the sites of masculine violence which combined to function as a reminder of the fighting dog origins of the breed. The notion of the unruly mongrel canine body and questionable practices of some breeders were also brought to the fore. The public were warned that there were issues with the standardisation of the breed and that ‘coloured mongrels and whippets’ were being sold as Staffordshire bull terriers (Our Kennel Correspondent 1935, 27), this rhetoric of standardisation and purity being employed to both criticise and defend the newly recognised breed.

In the late 1930s, press coverage of a suspected resurgence of dog fighting involving Staffordshire bull terriers was denied by both breeders and The Kennel Club. Those involved in breeding and exhibiting Staffordshire bull terriers were quick to defend the breed and argue that the dogs were increasing in popularity, being bred for the show ring, and were ‘standardized in type’ (Our Kennel Correspondent 1939, 18). Institutional standardisation through recognition by the Kennel Club may have leant legitimacy to the breed but the Staffordshire bull terrier’s reputation as a fighting dog persisted in some circles, leading one breed expert to note in 1971, that the dogs were ‘associated with ruffians and people who cared little for him as a dog, owning him instead, for what he could win them by fighting’ (Gordon 1971, 34).

Masculinity

During the 1980s, dog ownership increased significantly in the UK and the popularity of Staffordshire bull terriers also grew. By the mid-1980s Kennel Club registrations of the breed numbered in excess of 40,000 (Young 1985, 3). In media accounts from the 1970s and 1980s it is notable that Staffordshire bull terriers began to appear in major news stories about the re-emergence of badger baiting and dog fighting, practices considered to be directly linked to high levels of unemployment that affected young working-class men. *The Times* reported that ‘such activities work out frustrations and ownership of a good fighting dog can give a “ma-

cho” boost to the faltering self-confidence’ (Samstag 1985, 3). In an article on badger baiting, the *Daily Mail* reported that those responsible were urban gangs and the unemployed, ‘mindless thugs too cowardly to fight for themselves. The dogs are surrogates, outlets for their own violence [...]. These thugs boost their macho images by killing beautiful animals’ (Walker 1987, 6). There were reported to be around 50 badger baiting prosecutions annually by 1985, the year of the first prosecution of the twentieth century for dog fighting (Samstag 1985, 3). Those involved in the 1985 case were referred to as the ‘Enfield dog fighting ring.’ Making the point about the link between unemployment and organised dog fighting, *The Times* duly reported that the main figures involved were young unemployed men (Young 1985, 3).

1984 had seen record unemployment figures, the highest in post-war history and, as the decade progressed, a record number of house repossessions due to unprecedented interest rate rises. Against this economic backdrop, there were reported increases in drug use and violent crime, and high-profile media campaigns by the RSPCA presented new statistical evidence of record levels of animal cruelty in Britain (Molloy 2011b, 103). Mass unemployment and decreasing heavy industry in the UK undermined traditional gender roles that assumed that the main wage earner was male, a situation that served to disenfranchise large numbers of working-class men.⁶ Media reports about dog fighting and badger baiting connected the economic realities of unemployment with an emergent masculine identity that valued brutality and violence and used dogs to elevate personal status within social groups. Emergent forms of masculinity – hypermasculinity and the ‘new man’ – combined with equality legislation for women in the 1970s served to undo the certainty of previous traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, the influence of American gang culture on British masculinity was cited as a particular problem in news media discourse and those involved in cruel animal practices contradicted, what was assumed to be, the enduring representation of the UK as a ‘nation of animal lovers.’ Reports of pit bulls mauling people to death in America made their way into UK papers and connected ownership of the dogs with the same problematic masculinity, street gangs, and drug culture. Ownership of a pit bull terrier was considered emblematic of a deviant masculine identity that valued violence.⁷

⁶ For a full account of British masculinity during the 1980s, see Crowley (2020).

⁷ See, for example, George Gordon (1987, 6).

By the late-1980s, a dominant narrative of pit bull ownership was intrinsically connected with social deviance and masculinised aggression.

News coverage of the Enfield dog fighting ring in 1985 had brought the Staffordshire bull terrier's origins as a fighting dog back into public focus. Although the Staffordshire bull terrier who had been involved in the fight – a dog named Kim – was constructed by media accounts as a victim of the situation, the breed's fighting dog origins were made clear. The 1985 press reports also mentioned the American pit bull terrier, a type of dog that was, until that point, virtually unknown to the UK public. Devoting a full page to the subject of dog fighting, *The Times* reported that an estimated 500 American pit bull terriers were already in the UK, half of which were used regularly for fighting, and that the dogs changed hands for large sums of money (Samstag 1985, 3). Another article claimed that the dogs were bred for fighting and while they shared the same origins as the Staffordshire bull terrier, the dogs differed in two main ways: unlike the Staffordshire bull terrier, the pit bull was not a recognised breed either in the UK or the US and had been bred to be a larger type of dog (Samstag 1985, 3). The article ended with a quote from the RSPCA that the pit bull was 'lethal as a loaded gun' (p. 30), a sentiment echoed in other reports where the dogs were also referred to as 'a deadly weapon' (Brompton 1989, 11).

Within a month of the 1985 prosecution, an American pit bull terrier show was held in Salford organised by Ed Reid, the man credited with introducing the dogs to the UK and the first person to legally import an American pit bull terrier to the country. More than 40 dogs were reported to have taken part in the show that included agility and strength tests, and which was promoted as an event that showed the dogs' positive aspects. Quoted in one press article, Reid pointed out that 'The American pit bull has the same background as the Staffordshire bull terrier; although there is an element that does go in for illegal dog fighting, the dog cannot be blamed for that' (Parry 1985, 5). Whereas the shared origins of the two types of dog were used to vilify the Staffordshire bull terrier in media reports, those defending the American pit bull terrier employed the same rhetorical strategy to leverage some degree of legitimacy for the pit bull. Authorised by The Kennel Club as a recognised breed, the Staffordshire bull terrier could lay claim to a pedigreed ancestry which signified legitimate status, while the American pit bull terrier lacked any such recognition. Highlighting the shared heritage of the dogs was used by some supporters to argue for the pit bull to become a recognised breed, but all

attempts to negotiate an authorised breed identity for the pit bull were denied by The Kennel Club (Molloy 2011b, 102).

After 1985, and for the rest of the decade, news stories about dog fighting prosecutions continued to appear, accompanied by a growing sense of alarm about the links between dog fighting and drug-related crime (Molloy 2011b). As the decade progressed, mentions of the involvement of Staffordshire bull terriers in dog fighting diminished and American pit bull terriers became primarily associated with dog fighting practices. However, Staffordshire bull terriers did not disappear from news coverage, but the narrative shifted to their involvement in attacks on humans, particularly children. Dog attacks would become a regular feature of media reporting after 1985 and according to one newspaper, the Staffordshire bull terrier was fourth on a list of breeds responsible for most attacks in the UK after German shepherds, rottweilers and pit bull terriers (Boseley 1989, 5).

Dog Risk and Class

The surge in UK dog ownership in the 1980s led to newfound concerns about a range of issues connected to dogs: fouling, straying, and an increase in dog attacks. An article that labelled Staffordshire bull terriers 'devil dogs' and one of two breeds – the other being the bull terrier – responsible for most of the attacks on children suggested that the problems went beyond only these two breeds. Dogs owned by working class people were, the article suggested, out of control on the streets. There had been 241 dog attacks in London alone over a period of six months and 1,000 stray dogs were being euthanised every day (Ryan 1990, 13). This media narrative on dog ownership and risk drew a clear line between socially responsible owners and those who were unable or unwilling to keep their dogs under control. In 1990 the then Junior Environment Minister, David Heathcoat-Amory, declared in a newspaper report on 'danger pets' that some dogs were 'not only potentially dangerous – they are often cowed mangy creatures breaking open rubbish bags, fouling pavements and parks where children play and creating traffic accidents' because their owners put them 'out on to the street to roam around housing estates' (p. 13). Associations between Staffordshire bull terriers and working-class spaces such as the 'pit' and 'pub' had been replaced by the housing estate, public housing built by local authorities for the working classes which had, by the 1980s, become labelled as a social problem, places with high levels of crime and antisocial behaviour (Boughton 2018). Housing es-

tates were labelled in government discourse as 'pockets of lawlessness' and young boys and men were considered primarily responsible for the 'mindless violence' (Baker 1993, 436). If nineteenth century discourses had likened the poor and working classes to stray 'curs,' the media discourse of the 1980s and early 1990s framed working-class dog owners as violent and socially irresponsible; an analogue of their out-of-control dogs.

Following six years of media coverage of dog fighting, reported increases in dog attacks, and problems with stray dogs and fouling, a catalysing event in 1991 led to the introduction of breed-specific legislation in the UK. An attack by a pit bull terrier on a 6-year-old girl in Bradford was widely reported, accompanied by pictures of the child's wounds. The incident drew public outrage and intense media pressure on the government to act and introduce legislation that would curb the dangers posed by dogs. Despite the many media reports of attacks by breeds other than pit bulls – particularly rottweilers, German shepherd dogs, Staffordshire bull terriers and bull terriers – the decision was made to prohibit the pit bull terrier, Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino and Fila Brasileiro, none of which were officially recognised by the Kennel Club. There was no doubt that the legislation was based on class politics, a point confirmed when the then Home Secretary, Kenneth Baker, responsible for the Dangerous Dogs Act, admitted that a ban which included Kennel Club recognised breeds would have upset the middle classes (Baker 1993, 434–435). He wrote, 'the issue was made more complicated by the fact that the largest number of dog bitings was caused by Alsations and other domestic breeds whose owners would never have regarded their pets as dangerous' (p. 434). The distinction between 'domestic' and non-domestic breeds and their relative levels of dangerousness was constantly replayed in political and media discourses, promoting a prejudicial narrative that 'foreign' dog breeds were a greater risk to public safety. In this regard, pit bull terriers were considered the greatest public danger and Baker wrote, 'unlike other recognized breeds they were unpredictable and could not be reliably trained' (p. 435). This discourse on the instability of the pit bull and other 'foreign' dogs ignored the national origins of dog breeds, regarding so-called 'domestic' breeds as only those officially recognised by the Kennel Club.⁸ A nationalistic zeal for institutionally au-

⁸ For example, the Alsatian or German shepherd dog, rottweiler and Dobermann breeds were developed in Germany.

thorised and categorised canine bodies, those that were awarded a Kennel Club breed standard, marginalised pit bull terriers, a dog that, despite having UK origins, was considered to be a definitively American import. The owners were, like their dogs, also stigmatised through stereotypes of gendered working-class deviance. This was exemplified by Baker's comment that 'the "pit bull lobby" came to my aid by appearing in front of TV cameras with owners usually sporting tattoos and earrings and extolling the gentle nature of their dogs whose names were invariably Tyson, Gripper, Killer or Sykes' (p. 435). Men wearing earrings breached conventional standards of hegemonic masculinity while tattoos represented a form of bodily subversion which, at the time, was considered socially unacceptable. The notion that a dog's character reflected that of the owner was continually underscored in official pit bull narratives and, in the debate on breed-specific legislation and methods to identify dogs on 22 May 1991 in the House of Commons, Members of Parliament joked about 'whether the dog's tattoo should match that of the owner. Would' Baker asked, 'pit bulls have "love" and "hate" inscribed on each knuckle' (pp. 435–436).

Conclusion

The Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was rushed through in only six weeks and became law on 24 July 1991. UK breed-specific legislation made illegal the ownership, breeding, selling or exchange of pit bull terriers.⁹ The issue with banning pit bull terriers quickly became apparent as the dogs did not exist as a recognised 'breed.' In other words, pit bulls did not have a Kennel Club standard that specified the appearance and character of the dog. Identifying an officially recognised breed is relatively easy as each dog shares a physical similarity. However, the pit bull terrier had been developed as a fighting dog with value placed on 'gameness' – a desire to continue fighting regardless of pain or injury – rather than outward appearance. Although pit bulls shared some broadly similar characteristics, variability was, and is, common. 'Breed' in this context was, and remains, a product of nineteenth century processes of institutional standardisation that relies on general adherence to and acknowledgement of the fixity of official classification by a national kennel club. Although recognised by other registries set up as alternatives to national kennel clubs, for the

⁹ In 1997, an amendment to the 1991 Act removed the mandatory destruction order and reopened the Exempted Dogs Index, a register of those banned dogs which a court considered would not be a risk to public safety.

purposes of UK 'breed'-specific legislation, pit bulls are described not as a breed but as a 'type.'¹⁰ A series of head and body measurements adapted from a 1977 American pit bull magazine continue to be used to define whether a dog is a 'pit bull type' (Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2009).

UK breed-specific legislation targets dogs because of how they look, regardless of their behaviour. If a dog 'looks' like a pit bull type, that dog will either be euthanised or placed on a register, neutered, and ordered to be muzzled and leashed in public places for the remainder of their life. Despite being at one time a favoured dog of the upper classes, the pit bull's continued associations with deviant working-class masculinity have circulated through media discourse and informed public and political debate on dangerous dogs. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, since the introduction of breed-specific legislation in 1991, dog attacks on humans and dog bite fatalities have increased (Parkinson, Herring, and Gould 2023). The material impacts of the Dangerous Dogs Act on the lives of dogs are significant and, due to the misplaced focus on pit bulls, the legislation fails to protect the public.

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¹⁰ Examples of other registries include the United Kennel Club (UKC), Unified Bull Breed Registry (UBBR) and the UK Bully Kennel Club (UKBKC).

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