
The re-composition of class relations and the middle class

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At a cultural and material level class is on-goingly made and remade, articulating with race, gender and place. It is also important to acknowledge the salience of material, cultural, social and political resources in the formation of class, what Savage et al (2005) refer to as 'capitals', 'assets', and 'resources' that can be converted into class advantage. The point is that various class fractions have access to resources and networks that can be used to secure, if not enhance, their position. Some years ago Savage (2003) argued that the middle class constituted the 'particular universal class'. Whilst this class was normalised, it was also rendered unremarkable, unnoticeable and, in this sense, invisible and became constituted, in Savage's terms, as the paradigmatic class. It is here that the hidden injuries of class arise and we meet various terms to describe such processes that through the normalisation of the 'cultural arbitrary' of the middle class pathologise the working class and in particular its young people. Terms such as 'symbolic violence' allied to the normalisation and celebration of middle-class cultural capital capture this process. Whilst the normalisation of middle-class cultural forms may remain in place in the current conjuncture, the class structure is being transformed. Although those in the top of the top one per cent (Dorling, 2014) are able to secure their position this is far less certain for those further down the class structure. The changed socio-economic conditions following 2008 have served to rekindle the visibility and salience of class relations, albeit accented by individualisation.

It is important to consider the salience of particular constructions of class and its analysis in the current period, one in which class relations are being re-composed. There is a tension in discussions that address cultural capital and the struggle for

positional advantage of the middle class, arising from the conflation of the middle and upper 'ruling' class. This can readily lean towards a gradation of structural relations. We encounter arguments that emphasise the differential resources, assets and valued capitals available to middle-class young people that enable them to be acquainted with the 'rules of the game', in contrast to their working-class peers.

However, if we rethink the way in which we conceive class, acknowledging the complexities and changes that are a feature of the current conjuncture, a rather different picture emerges. For many employed in quasi-professional and managerial occupations experiences of performativity, precariousness, over-qualification, managerialism and underemployment, accompanied by the threat of redundancy, may lead such workers to have a qualitatively different experience of waged labour to previous generations. This lived experience brings to the fore exploitative and oppressive relations and much the same could be said about those working in graduate-level jobs. Although, in comparison to other groups, these workers have undoubted privileges and possess valued capitals and better life chances, such workers experience intensification and increasing levels of exploitation at work accompanied by deskilling and proletarianisation. It is also important to consider the stakes and investments such workers have in the status quo which serves to blunt their radicalism. Wright's (2015) notion of contradictory class location captures this ambiguity.

Paradoxically, an acknowledgement of these contradictory locations can return the discussion to a gradational model of class with different structural positions having contrasting interests in the status quo or societal transformation. The pivotal question

turns on the way in which we understand these class relations, particularly in the current conjuncture. A gradational position leads to a reformist politics that calls for a politics of access and a fairer distribution of life chances set within a flatter distribution of income and wealth. This can easily fold over into a social democratic concern with equal opportunities, a stance that stops short of a revolutionary and anti-capitalist project. Byrne (2017) in a critique of Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2010), sets this within a Fabian and technicised discussion of inequality that seeks to minimise the inequities of capitalism yet leaves it in place. Social democracy represents an ideology that celebrates a move towards a more egalitarian social structure whilst simultaneously attempting to secure the interests of capital.

The limits of a reformist politics in the current conjuncture, in which the labour market and class structure is being hollowed out, could prefigure a rather different class politics. Byrne's paper references the past as well as the present and seeks to resuscitate the notion of the aristocracy of labour. He uses this term to refer to those in the top half but outside the 'top decile and certainly the top 1 per cent' of the income distribution. This group depends on its income from waged labour but has experienced a decline in real wages, faces growing insecurity and its children face an uncertain future. Brown (2016) in a rather different vein refers to 'a crisis in middle-class reproduction that has yet to find expression in class opposition'. Gradational models of class serve to fracture class relations. Byrne's analysis suggests the possibility of a common cause across the gradients of class structure amongst those who have to sell their labour in order to survive. Perhaps the specificity of the current socio-economic conjuncture prefigures this possibility.

It is important to consider on-going changes in class structure reflected in the growth of precariousness and the hollowing out of middle-level occupational positions that have led to a crisis in what Brown (2016) refers to as middle-class 'reproduction'. The former advantages attached to 'middle' class positions are being undermined in a context in which the winner-takes-all. This poses the possibility of a politics organised around such changes leading to the re-composition of class structure, one located in an anti-capitalist project. The alternative, expressed in 'positional conflict theory' (Brown, 2016) is an ongoing struggle for advantage which can lead to a shuffling of class positions without undermining these or their embeddedness in capitalist relations. To the extent

that conceptions of class veer towards a gradational model they implicitly conspire with a hierarchical model of the social formation and sit alongside the logic of capitalist accumulation - a logic that must be resisted.

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