

Panel 3 commentary on ‘Inequality, poverty and division’ (BL, 30/5/14).

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- 3 fascinating but very different papers, complimenting each other, from the theoretical to the empirical, from the macro to the living experience, from the experience to political resistance. And yet, they add to the tapestry of interwoven narratives of everyday lives during the time of the cuts, encompassing the privileged and the unprivileged. And I’m pleased that, as was clear in all the papers in the panel, we cannot treat this subject only analytically and not also normatively.
- I want to leave maximum time for general discussion and therefore will not talk long, but I want to raise one or two questions and points of discussion to each of the papers.
- In relation to Mike’s paper, I am pleased that he’s applying here (and in his other work) a much wider and more complex picture of understanding class and class dynamics in a way which explores the privileged and the powerful as well as the working classes and the precariat. Indeed, especially when we live at the so-called the age of austerity in which the elites are far from suffering loss of power and privilege, this is more important than ever.
- However, I would like to draw everyone’s attention to what is implicit rather than explicit in Mike’s analysis, in spite of its richness, complexity and being informed, while being critical by Bourdieu and feminist theorists of class, ie intersectional analysis. I don’t have time to develop it here, but in other places I’ve argued that we need to adopt intersectionality as the theoretical approach to sociological stratification. Only intersectionality which explores, without privileging prima-facia any axes of differential social power can incorporate and highlight the relationships between class, gender, race, generation and other axes of power. However, the intersectionality approach that we need to adopt will treat the different social divisions not as additive or cross cutting, but as mutually constitutive. Moreover, such an approach will not reduce social positioning, identifications and political and normative values to each other but will explore the related situational relationships between them as expressed in the fascinating narratives, for example, that Mike quoted. He was not really talking about ‘pure’ classes, as they were constructed in relation to particular locations in the UK, stages in the life cycle, gender etc.
- In relation to Faiza’s paper, I endorse her insistence (also assumed in Mike’s paper) that while examining the everyday and its representations is of crucial importance, we cannot fully understand the underlying issues unless we examine the macro social, economic and political structures, the ‘drives’ she was talking about. Nor can the boundaries of this examination be national or regional. This is why the intersectional stratification approach I mentioned before needs to be analyzed within a spatial multiscalar framework as well as a temporal one. The ‘Great Recession’ is not only a result of British or European neoliberalism, but – as we could clearly see in the results of the recent European elections local structures and power relations play crucial roles.

- One of the underlying problematic of this ‘age of austerity’ is the double crisis of governability and governmentality, in which executive states spend most their energies mediating between the powerful elites controlling multi-national corporations and the people, and more and more people – again as evidenced in the recent election results and social and political turmoil all over the world – are withdrawing their consent from this mode of governing which can offer more and more of the population less and less resources.
- And this is where we come to Tim Hall’s paper on the Living Wage campaign of Citizens UK as a model of a new kind of politics that arise in the vacuum that this double crisis of governability and governmentality is leaving. There is no doubt that in many ways this is an important and successful campaign. However, as Tim already mentioned, it raises at least as many questions as it attempts to answer. Questions about who and what is ‘the community’ and who has the authority and legitimacy to so-called represent it; questions about who defined ‘the common good’ and/or what is ethical and what is not. I’m troubled by the legitimacy that this form of social activism, in spite of all the good work it does accomplish, offers social, religious and political organizations and so-called community leaders which promote gender, sexuality and I’m afraid more and more exclusionary racist values that I do not want to be legitimized. Of course, I don’t want to create the impression that agencies of the state, the market and party politics are not engaged in similar trends, but I would not want for alternative emancipatory forms of social and political activism to endorse this. Recent events in other countries, such as Egypt and Libya, for example, as well as Ukraine, should alert us to some of the dangers in these short term gains. It is not that I oppose activism for the sake of ‘the good life’ and ‘well being’ – in both my research and political activism I come across too many who need so much that the rest of us take for granted, not least the right to plan even a short term future – and here indeed Judith Butler’s term that Mike used about ‘precarious lives’ is so apt. And it’s not that I think politics should always be about confrontation – it’s much too easy to unite around protest rather than to build alternative political structures – the Occupy movements here, in the US and Israel are good examples of this. However, we should beware of thinking politically too little as well as too big.
- Anyway, enough from me – I’m sure everyone is eager to take part in the discussion. Thank you.