

BOOK REVIEW

Class Inequality in Austerity Britain: Power, Difference and Suffering

Will Atkinson, Steven Roberts and Mike Savage (Eds)
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Within the whirlwind of media output which highlights the hardships generated by “austerity”, alongside the continued repetition of images of the underserving poor embedded within TV shows such as “Benefits Street”, the collection of chapters presented in *Class Inequality in Austerity Britain* brings to the forefront some of the real challenges and issues which are faced by people living in disadvantaged communities today. Media representations of those hit hardest by the financial crash in the UK tend to introduce the viewer or reader to previously stable and secure middle class households who now struggle to maintain the lifestyle to which they are accustomed. The challenges experienced by disadvantaged communities are the starting point of the discussion which runs throughout this book. In doing so it brings to the reader considered analysis of how individuals and households experience a range of psycho-social harms, within a context of long-term neo-liberal politics.

The initial chapter by Atkinson illustrates how across the income scale all households are making adjustments to their daily lives in terms of their ability to meet living expenses. Through the application of Bourdieu’s concept of *hysteresis* (the disconnection between what is objectively possible and subjectively desired), Atkinson demonstrates that whilst all households are altering consumption practices, it remains those within the “dominated class” who are experiencing the greatest distance between their subjective desires and what is objectively achievable. He argues that this results in the experience of not only “economic violence”, as they lose their ability to attain their desires, but also the “symbolic violence” which accompanies this loss. This discussion of symbolic violence, the discreet ways in which a particularly pernicious, but subtle, attack is launched at the status of lower income individuals, households and communities, is one of the core themes running through a number of chapters in the book. This ensures that a strong and coherent spine is maintained throughout the discussions (not always the case in an edited text).

Thus Reay's discussion of the educational experiences of young, disadvantaged, people outlines a number of subtle signals within the daily routines of the classroom which present them as inferior in some way to those students who are seen to take individual responsibility for their education and seek to progress. Here, symbolic violence is presented within educational practices such as their setting (where the bottom set is perceived as being the non-achievers), through to the ways in which teachers correct the speech patterns of students. This fosters a situation in which students perceive their limited educational success as being related to their own inadequacies, and not the broader social inequalities in which they are growing up. Developed alongside Reay's account, Roberts and Evans argue that political discourses have shaped a perception of "aspiration" which places middle class values at the forefront. However, their analysis of disadvantaged young people's "imagined futures" demonstrates alternative desires about their futures, which would lead to respectability and preferred future lives: defined in their own terms and not middle class values. Whilst Roberts and Evans question the potential of securing more modest futures within the contemporary political and policy context, the discussions across these chapters set out some core ideas which are discussed specifically in relation to communities later in the book.

In her chapter exploring St Ann's council estate (now itself expanded into a full-length book), McKenzie draws on the central concept of symbolic violence to examine the lived experiences of its residents and how they perceive being "looked down on" by other residents of Nottingham more widely. As a result community residents perceive they have a status of being less worthy than others but, rather than accept this stigma, they seek out their own, locally generated, source of self-worth attached to place and residency. Locally produced measures of self-worth overlap to some extent with the discussion of young people's imagined futures – for example, the role of motherhood – but also with the achievement of respect and belonging within the locality. McKenzie expresses this as an effort to secure a route away from, rather than out of, the neighbourhood. Residents opt to stay because they can secure success and validation through the local value system. This points to the conclusion that the Big Society concept of the UK coalition government is problematic because it argues that social cohesion has failed when in fact this very community spirit is the source of an alternative, local, value system. Following on from this, through a systematic examination of the key claims of the Big Society and localism agendas Savage deflates them as misconceived. Their middle class belonging and participation underpinnings run counter to the ways in which disadvantaged communities operate. Working class residents are unwilling to migrate for career progression partly because for many occupations such ladders simply do not exist, but principally because their lives are invested in their place and location built upon access to nearby work opportunities, social ties and amenities within, and personal feelings about their locality.

Throughout the text the conceptual thread of 'symbolic violence' is linked to the work of Bourdieu, referring to the way in which those with the most power impose their own cultural values and way of life on to others, and in doing so legitimate this as the only and right way to do things. The narrative through the chapters demonstrates that symbolic violence is the result of the continuing dominance of neo-liberal economic and political discourse in the UK. While many of these arguments have been long established in social analysis, this text seeks to illustrate the persistence of these issues within the politics of austerity. The editors conclude with three challenges to sociological knowledge: increased competition of politically useful knowledge; the reliance of social science in journalism; and attacks on the autonomy of social science. These create barriers to promoting the findings and analysis contained within this edited volume more widely.

However, recognition of this issue does form part of a wider analysis which can be applied to many other Western nations. Throughout my reading, I was reminded of Cattell's (2012) use of Engels' term "Social Murder" to refer to the indifference of governments to the suffering of individuals and communities. Consequently the analysis offered in this text provides a useful lens through which the complex interplay between economics, social interaction and social policy is played out within the community setting. This was particularly poignant when reading Roberts and Evans' conclusion: "The view that academics can remain objective and detached researchers is untenable given the harmful impact of the current government to those whose voices we seek to make heard" (p. 87). Thinking more broadly, this text offers a particular narrative around alternative constructions of social value within the local community context, to provide a wider articulation which goes beyond the dominant neo-liberal account of what individuals and communities should aspire to be. Alongside efforts to explore alternative values within community settings, such as the work of Gibson-Graham (1996) in relation to economics and the growth of alternative currencies, the analysis within this text offers a further tool for examining local constructions of value beyond the (neo-liberal) economic sphere, whilst simultaneously highlighting the need to clearly articulate the necessity of promoting alternatives.

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