

'Stuck in their ways': how we blame the poor for their failure to embrace globalisation

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*We find it easier to talk about class in purely economic terms. **Lisa McKenzie** argues that in fact our perceptions of class are tightly bound up in stigmatising value judgments. The same impulse that condemned the 'undeserving poor' to workhouses is apparent in condemnation of the poor for their attachment to the local in the face of a globalised economy.*



Some of the author's interviewees. Photo: Lisa McKenzie

Class division and the social sciences

Over the past century, the Marxist theory of class inequality based on who owns the means of production has been challenged – and rightly so, as class division does not solely rest upon economic inequalities but also cultural inequalities. While I fully accept Marx's theory that the economic capitalist system is based and founded on absolute arrangements of exploitation, class inequality also rests in meanings, hierarchies and value judgments. It is not solely about who makes the decisions, but who establishes these judgments.

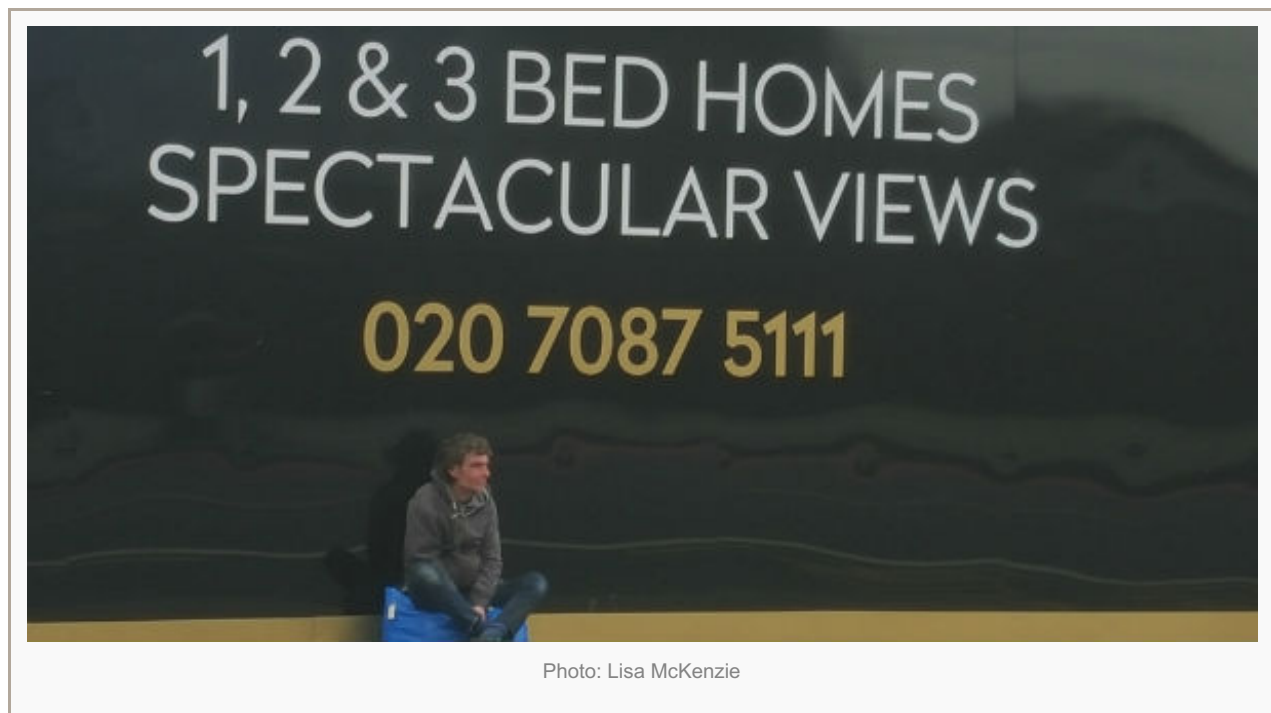
Yet in the social sciences class division has always been a difficult subject, precisely because of those systems of exploitation and how they work in praxis. It has been easier in the last century for intellectuals to speak of class disadvantage in forms of 'poverty' rather than inequality. The idea and the concept of poverty is easier to tackle than that of inequality, and especially the unequal distribution of power and resources within a society. How do you know if you have too much?

Yet class division by any definition – whether that of Marx, [Goldthorpe](#) or [Savage](#) – has a subjective dimension. Indeed some individuals may not know or identify with a defined class position, but define themselves within the context of their lived experience. Consequently, measuring and surveying this type of class inequality, exploitation and injustice between groups have become increasingly difficult within the social sciences.

Moreover, many Western European countries entered into social contracts post-1945 that include the provision of health, education, housing and social insurance schemes as a means to counter levels of absolute poverty and manage risk. Policy makers, politicians, and their friends in academia over the last 60 years have claimed to eradicate poverty. And the conversations have increasingly been turned away from class inequality and exploitation, and towards a conversation about personal failures among the poor.

Precarity and stigmatisation

The precariat, according to [Guy Standing](#) (2011), are a group of people across the world who live and work precariously, usually in a series of short-term jobs and without recourse to stable occupational identities or careers. They lack stable social protection and regulation does not apply to them. They include migrants, but also locals. Standing explains that this class of people are producing new instabilities in society. They are increasingly frustrated and angry but also dangerous because they have no voice, and are hence vulnerable to the siren calls of extreme political parties – and/or may remove themselves from democratic systems of government completely. At the same time, they attract loathing, stigma, ridicule and amusement through their methods of managing their fear and precariousness.



This management of fear comes through closely identifying with the local, and tightening their notions of identity through 'who we are' and through complicated and voracious notions of belonging. It is manifest in distinct cultural forms: likes, choice of clothing, speech and their strong connection to community belonging and values. As a result, these people are dismissed as old fashioned, immovable, rigid and unable to bend to the wishes of a globalising market. The ways in which they dress, speak, walk and how they raise their families come under scrutiny and they are devalued. When Britain needs people to serve coffee, clean hotel rooms and look after its children there are 'better' working class people from Italy, Poland, Nigeria or Brazil who can be enlisted.

The dangerous class

Working class people are not only loathed and blamed for their own poverty, but they are also stigmatised as 'dangerous'. Generations of Britons have debated the 'state' of the poorest people: their usefulness, their behaviour, their values and their taste. We have also debated who they are, how we can define them and what we call them. Middle-class anxiety about the poor stretches back to at least 1601 with the introduction of the Poor Law. In 1832 a

Royal Commission, under the chairmanship of the Bishop of London, conducted a detailed survey of the state of poor law administration. His report took the view that poverty was essentially caused by the indigence of individuals rather than economic and social conditions. If not dealt with, the poor become dangerous and criminal.

The Commission's 22 recommendations were to form the basis of the [1834 Poor Law Amendment Act](#). It led to a major overhaul of how poor relief was administered, splitting the poor into the deserving (respectable, perhaps 'unlucky') and (deviant, problematic, and criminal) ([Welshman 2007](#)).

Culture value and the Great British Class Survey

I was part of the [Great British Class Survey](#) team working with Mike Savage. My role was to take the survey to the group at the bottom that were identified as 'precarariat' – they are working class people, but do not have the stability of employment, homes, and social goods that previous generations after 1945 had secured through their political involvement with co-operative and trade-union movements. As I asked groups of women and men in East London and in Nottinghamshire the survey questions, I was struck that the participants knew that they were getting it wrong. They knew what I was really asking in terms of class, culture, and value. They knew that their answers were not valued or 'legitimate'. They knew that disliking opera had a value judgment attached to it. They knew that their liking the TV programme Mrs Brown's Boys would be judged too, but to them one was funny and the other was boring. Although many of the respondents had seen opera on television or heard operatic music, it didn't seem like anything they might want to do after a hard day at work. "It seems like hard work to me," said one young mother from Nottingham. This was difficult and embarrassing for me. I knew what I was really asking, and so did they; I also knew what their answer would be, and they knew I knew. It became even more embarrassing when we got to the next question on the survey, which was about bingo. This is a clear example of how cultural capital works within people's lives and also how it is used to create and reproduce elitism and stigma. When stately homes, opera, and museums are your pursuits, you know these activities are recognised as 'good taste'. They enable you to move through society easily. But when your interests and activities are going to the bingo, the pub or watching the telly, these answers count against you. They show you up.



One of the author's interviewees. Photo: Lisa McKenzie

Many people have asked me about these kinds of judgments. Why are some things more valued than others? And why are other things devalued, even though you like them? One of the most common questions I get asked from women is about the way they dress, and why they are 'looked down on' for wearing big hooped gold earrings, and why when a TV show wants to show a 'common' character it shows her with a ponytail, wearing a tracksuit and gold

jewellery.

This is the cultural element to class distinction, and is as significant to inequality and injustice as the economic material forces which produce it. [Bev Skeggs](#) (2005) has argued that the consequences of stigmatisation, and rebranding the poor working class as valueless, have been central in producing new ways of exploitation through the fields of culture, and media, inventing new forms of class differentiation which are produced through processes of what Pierre Bourdieu would term symbolic violence.

How can we stop stigmatising the poor? We should start by admitting the problem, and recognising snobbery for what it is: a means of legitimising cultural distinction and perpetuating the status quo. Then we should be clear that to be working class is not an admission of failure or lower status. It could mean a cultural system of shared values, communitarianism, co-operativism: a sense of localism, rather than failure to achieve mobility. And we should realise that true social mobility would mean some of the children of the rich and the middle classes moved 'down' the social ladder.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.

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