

What now for the precariat?

Reflecting on the 'Social Class in the 21st Century' book launch and public lecture, by Ronda Daniel



For more details about the book, and Mike Savage, please see: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/researchingsociology/2015/10/24/social-class-in-the-21st-century-an-interview-with-mike-savage/>

When questions were asked to the co-authors of 'Social Class in the 21st Century' during LSE's public lecture to launch the book on Monday 2nd November, an audience member asked 'now that we know that a precariat class exists, and who they are, what can we do about it?' LSE's Lisa McKenzie, who penned a chapter in the book called 'The Precarious Precariat: The Visible, Invisible People', had a straightforward answer; 'end capitalism'. Certainly, when the question was asked, one word sprang to mind: mobilisation. But does the precariat have the knowledge to do so? What's stopping them? Perhaps the government and the media's divide and conquer strategy plays a pivotal role in this.

Fearmongering is not uncommon in the mainstream media. News in particular, and more recently, social media, is one of the most accessible ways of contacting the outside world and finding out what has been going on in the day. One key fear on everyone's minds in disadvantaged areas, is immigration. By dividing the working class by migration and race, the current state of play for the precariat is going to perpetuate. Migration is a scapegoat for countless social problems today; such as the housing crisis, coinciding with more social housing being sold off privately than ever as well as the difficulties of accessing healthcare; coinciding with the privatisation of the NHS. With social issues and opinions around these blown out of proportion by the mainstream media, the precariat class is limited in how much it can unite. It is thought that due to social media groups and internet access now reaching 22 million households (accounting for 84%) in the UK; this is certainly beneficial for keeping informed, and mobilisation. However, internet memes and text edited into photos are regularly distributed by groups such as Britain First, are regularly believed and shared around, especially from people in disadvantaged areas. As well as migrants, the precariat is also being divided from their own in another way; poverty porn. This divides the 'working' class into those that are working, and those that are not, via the negative representation of benefits claimants, despite lots of families claiming benefits due to not earning enough money. Programmes such as Benefits Street, which Lisa alluded to in the public lecture, presented residents of James Turner Street in Birmingham negatively. Reflecting on the programme, residents discussed how they felt deceived, and how the positive community feelings were edited out, and the difficulties they faced such as caring roles, addiction, were completely omitted from the programmes. The initial showing of the programme caused a Twitter storm, attacking the residents as 'scroungers' and 'scum'. Words like these remind me of Beverley Skeggs' *Dis-identification of Working Class Women*, where women made efforts not to be labelled as working-class, because of stigmas like the above. For example, having designer handbags, and saying things like 'they're the ones that beat their kids' and 'they're the ones that hang around the dole office' referring to what they perceived to be working class women.

This dis-identification reminds me of an important quote made by Lisa, noting that the precariat accounts for 15% of the overall population, but less than 1% of the Great British Class Survey;

'why would we want to fill something out only to find out that we're no good, we're at the bottom?' This is why stigmatisation is important to battle; it needs to be replaced with engagement for the precariat to help themselves. Issues of social class also need to be discussed accessibly and openly; class should not be overlooked as an issue on activists' shoulders, and it should also not be overlooked as a purely academic discussion. Including the precariat in a discussion about the precariat is critical.

Recently, there has been discussion in politics, about Jeremy Corbyn, the new elected leader of the Labour Party, as a 'voice of the working-class'. Whilst migration and social problems aforementioned leading to the rise of splinter parties such as UKIP, in just the 24 hours after Corbyn's election, 15,000 people joined the Labour Party, and it is rising fast, with over 370,000. As well as split opinions among the precariat about him, there is also another problem facing us: do we really have 5 years to wait to vote for Corbyn? With trade unions losing their rights and voices, more people being evicted from their homes and more social housing being sold off privately, the precariat's situation will only worsen within 5 years if they are not given a voice or method to mobilise. As a precariat, and a sociology student, I feel that class needs to be taken seriously as a key social division in society and it is up to people with a voice, to give others a voice, and make sociology and politics more accessible.

Interesting reads:

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/apr/06/welfare-britain-facts-myths>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-26243087>

<http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/nov/03/sean-bean-lauds-jeremy-corbyn-for-standing-up-for-working-class-people>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/more-people-have-joined-labour-since-jeremy-corbyn-became-leader-than-are-in-the-lib-dems-10512815.html>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/generalelection/what-does-five-more-years-of-the-tories-mean-for-britain-10236176.html>

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