

Successful Societies – “Self, Individualism and Moral Communities under Neo-Liberalism.”

Personal Reflections on **Successful Societies** meeting, London, January 30-31 2015 by Mike Savage.

This blog reports on a fascinating seminar held at the end of January in London, part funded by my ESRC Professorial Fellowship. This seminar was an unusual opportunity to allow interchange between eminent European and North American social scientists to address the relationship between “*Self, Individualism and Moral Communities under Neo-Liberalism.*” The over-arching concern was to consider how profound neo-liberal restructuring has been associated with the remaking of personal identities and how we can thus better understand the links between change at the macro and micro level as they are occurring today.

A feature of this seminar was thus the opportunity to reflect on different traditions of North American and European social science for exploring these questions, as well as the differing approaches which can be found within psychology and cultural sociology. Given the weighty issues explored, no firm conclusions were reached, but a number of fundamental themes arose out of these discussions which will help set future agendas.

1: The power and social influence of contemporary capitalism. Craig Calhoun argued powerfully that the current capitalist crisis was historically the first which had not been accompanied by major socialist opposition. He suggested that capitalism had become a machine for creating externalities which entailed a lack not just of critique of capitalism itself but of its relations to politics and other social institutions. He reflected on the institutional success of capitalist corporations and the challenges this would pose for democratic futures.

2: The issue about how this current conjuncture was associated with a fundamental break in the nature of class relationships was addressed by several speakers, including Beverley Skeggs and Mike Savage. Here the argument was that in previous periods the working class played an important role in shaping democratic capitalism, but that this has been changed radically by economic transformation, globalisation, and especially the rise of the wealthy elites. The significance of the growing profile of wealthy elites was discussed by several speakers. The extent to which changes at the bottom end of the social structure were also changing the character of working class culture was also discussed through the input of Skeggs and Duvoux, both of whom emphasised the individualising and stigmatising forces exerted towards these groups.

3. A linked stream of reflections concerned the cultural aspects of the current neo-liberal conjuncture. Calhoun’s argument implied little or no place for a ‘cultural’ reading of capitalism because of the power of its economic and institutional forces. Other presentations had different emphases. Underpinning Peter Wagner’s reflections on the different trajectories of Brazil, South Africa and Europe was an interest in the changed conditions of modernity and self-understanding in different contexts. This allowed him to recognise the diversity of experiences in these experiences and resist arguments suggesting unilinear or global trends. Skeggs further argued that there has been a profound remaking of the ‘self’ so that working class individuals felt a loss of self and personhood, with the result that they were marginalised and stigmatised, though they could find alternative strategies for seeking to gain value elsewhere. This perspective was consistent with Nicolas Duvoux’s examination of how those in receipt of welfare spending often accepted and internalised this neo-liberal ‘subjectification’. Sam Pehrson helpfully pointed to the complexity of identification processes by which people might affiliate to social groups. All these

contributors point in different ways to the limited class consciousness of those at the bottom of the income hierarchies.

4. These concerns were linked also to reflections on the significance of the nation state and the city in the current context of rampant neo-liberal globalising concerns. Adrian Favell introduced a discussion on the significance, desirability and generalizability of the British case where the European free market has allowed marked immigration which could be a precursor for economic dynamism. Savage complemented his arguments by reflecting further on the way in which the case of London allowed it to develop as a distinctive elite location. Pherson's reflections on the lack of cross national evidence for any association between attitudes to immigration and national identity were striking evidence that national forces mediate in different ways. Savage raised the issue that these trends might amplify urban distinctiveness, as large metropolitan cities became vehicles for powerful emerging socio-cultural currents which aligned wealthy elites to powerful capitalist forces.

Several contributors reflected on what new kinds of politics might be engendered by these trends, although no consensus arose. There was widespread agreement that older class politics was weakened but different views about the viability of new forms of politics linked to the accentuation of wealth inequalities.

Successful Societies attendees

The Successful Societies Program is funded by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. For more details on its intellectual agenda, see the two collective volumes produced by the group: *Successful Societies: How Institutions and Culture Affect Health*; and *Social Resilience in the Neo-Liberal Era*. See also <http://www.cifar.ca/successful-societies-timeline>

Those members attending were:

Peter Hall, Senior Fellow, Program Co-Director, Krupp Foundation Professor of European Studies at Harvard University

Michele Lamont, Senior Fellow, Program Co-Director, Acting Director of the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, a Professor of Sociology and African and African American Studies and the Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies at Harvard University.

G rard Bouchard, Professor in the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Qu bec at Chicoutimi.

Margaret Frye, Global Scholar, Harvard

Peter Gourevitch, Distinguished Professor of Political Science at UC San Diego's School of International Relations and Pacific Studies,

David Grusky, Senior Fellow, Director of the Center on Poverty & Inequality, the California Welfare Laboratory, and Recession Trends, Professor of Sociology, Stanford

Patrick LeGales, sociologist and political scientist, CNRS research director at the Center for European Studies at Sciences Po and professor at Sciences Po, FBA.

Will Kymlicka, Senior Fellow, Canada Research Chair in Political Philosophy at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada

Paul Pierson, Senior Fellow, John Gross Professor of Political Science University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Vijayendra Rao, Lead Economist in the Development Research Group of the World Bank

Leane S Son-Hing, Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Guelph

Speakers

Prof Craig Calhoun, Director, London School of Economics

Prof Nicolas Duvoux, Paris Descartes

Prof Adrian Favell, Sciences Po

Dr Sam Pehrson, University of St Andrews

Prof Mike Savage, London School of Economics

Prof Bev Skeggs, Goldsmiths College, University of London

Prof Peter Wagner, University of Barcelona

LSE guests

Dr Sam Friedman, Assistant Professor of Sociology, LSE

Dr Daniel Laurison, Research Fellow in Sociology, LSE

Katharina Hecht, PhD student in Sociology, LSE

Tara Lai Quinlan, PhD student in Sociology, LSE

Bruno Barboza-Muniz, PhD student in Sociology, LSE.

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