

# Lisa humble

Sociology, Poverty



Lisa Humble The underclass The underclass is a widely debated topic, which is discussed by two opposing groups, those with a cultural view and those with a structural view. The two groups are for and against the underclass and both have strong opinions on the topic. Some sociologists argue that there is an "underclass" and this class of people are underneath the working class in the class hierarchy. The term "underclass" refers to a group of people that, in some people's opinions are at the lowest position of the class hierarchy. The underclass has been greatly discussed since the 1960s when Gunnar Myrdal referred to them as a "class of unemployed, unemployables and underemployed", who are more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements (Myrdal, 1963, p. 121). Socialists have agreed that there is definitely a group of people at the bottom, but do not agree with why they are there. There are two views, the cultural view, who argue that the underclass are scroungers, dependant on benefits and have no intention of looking for work. Then there is the structural view, who argues that these people are at the bottom of the class system because society put them there, with factors such as poor relatives and very few jobs which can lead to social exclusion. The underclass began in America where urban black ghettos were targeted by Gunnar Myrdal as a "growing underclass who suffered poverty and were likely too for generations" (Myrdal, 1963). Race became the biggest feature of this class until sociologist William Julius Wilson changed the debate back to a structure of class. Wilson sees blacks as making up an underclass, but only because he feels that they have had an unfair disadvantage, not cultural differences. Racism and lack of experience has stopped these groups from finding

employment. The people in these groups who had found success have moved on, leaving the so called underclass behind (Wilson, 1987. P40). Charles Murray (1989) holds a cultural view of the underclass. He argues that in America and more recently in Britain, there is a growing underclass which is defined in terms of behaviour and attitudes. It includes single parents, the unemployed who do not want to work and those making a living out of crime. He argues that the underclass do not have values such as honesty and hard work. They live off benefits, which are encouraging and allowing people to become single parents and children are brought up without a male role model and don't understand the value of having a hard working father. Murray (1989) argues that illegitimacy is increasing rapidly, particularly among women from the lower social classes. Young men without a job are less likely to be able to support a family, so less likely to get married when they father children and therefore illegitimacy rates rise. Murray (1989) believes a change to the benefit system would be a good start to resolving this problem. Murray (1989) puts the underclass into three categories, single parents, the unemployed who do not want to work and those making a living off crime. They are points in Murray's arguments that can be argued, e. g. women could be single parents due to the fact that their partner has died and the unemployed could actually want to work, just unable to find employment. Murray argues that in the USA there is a black "underclass" that consists of criminals, single mothers and young men who do not wish to work. Murray believes all of the problems stem from the benefit system, as people become dependant on living off benefits rather than wanting to go out and make a living. According to Murray it is too easy for

women to have babies and live as single parents and for males to revoke their responsibilities as fathers, therefore, unmarried women should not be able to receive benefits. New right solution agrees welfare should be reduced to reduce the dependency culture. Norman Dennis and George Erdos (1992) support Murray's argument, they say that broken homes exist due to people co-habiting, being able to get an easy divorce and males not taking their roles as fathers seriously. They argue that the children are not getting the balance of male and female influence and this could lead to crime. There are points in Murray's argument that could be agreeable as there are many people who are quite comfortable to stay on benefits and not seek employment but there are lots of flaws in his arguments. Murray's theory ignores the structural factors which cause lack of economic success - Lack of employment opportunities and the decline of manual work. Ralf Dahrendorf (1992) has a similar view with that of Murray. Dahrendorf also sees the underclass as a type of illness, calling it "a cancer which eats away at the texture of societies". He states about the underclass: "Includes a lifestyle of laid-back sloppiness, association in changing groups of gangs, congregation around discos or the like, hostility to middle class society, peculiar habits of dress, of hairstyle, often drugs or at least alcohol — a style in other words which has little in common with the values of the work society" (Dahrendorf 1992 p. 13) Although this is similar to Murray's argument Dahrendorf explains how the underclass came about differently, as he believes the underclass has been caused by changes in work. Giddens (1973) holds a structural view, he argues that women and ethnic minorities are more likely to be found in the underclass. Employers recruit women to jobs beneath

them; this is partly because of social prejudice but also because they are more likely to stop working due to marriage or childbirth. Giddens (1973) says: " Where ethnic differences serve as a disqualifying market capacity, such those in the category are heavily concentrated in the lowest paid occupations, or are chronically unemployed or semi-employed, we may speak of the existence of an underclass" (Giddens 1973 p. 112) Dean (1990) believes that the term underclass should not be used anymore, as it implies that this group of people are at fault for their situation. Sociologists argue that the term underclass should be changed to " social exclusion", as this means the people are more disadvantaged rather than to blame. It also covers a larger group rather than focusing it on the poor. Gooby (1992) interviewed a number of people who were claiming benefits and he found very little evidence that there is a large group of people dependant on benefits and he found that the people he interviewed had the same aspirations as others. This is unreliable as the people getting interviewed could tell the interviewer what they thought they wanted to hear, rather than the truth. (Haralambos and Holborn p. 50) Heath (1990) collected data to test the claim that the underclass show different attitudes. His evidence suggests that the majority wanted jobs and happy marriages, but they were less likely than other members of society to believe in marriage before children. Murray's views have come under serious attack from his critics. Walker (1990) argues that lone parenthood is often short lived and most single women with children find partners. He argues that most of the so-called underclass want a stable relationship and paid employment. He argues that it is lack of opportunities that prevent them from achieving. The

cultural view will not recognise economic divisions and ignore structural factors, such as the lack of employment for unskilled workers. This view blames the underclass for their own problems and sets them aside in society. They will look into the fact that people are sometimes in this situation through no fault of their own, but argue that the majority are lazy scroungers. They also believe that this cycle will continue, as parents don't do enough to encourage their children to study hard, therefore the cycle continues and there is a knock on effect. This view is strongly criticised, as it lacks evidence to support that these people actually exist. The structural view looks at their situation from a different point of view; they argue that the underclass is held back as there are limited opportunities for them. They say the lack of jobs available is the main cause because they often live in areas of high unemployment. The structural view theorists seem to have researched the underclass in more depth but evidence is not convincing as most were asking the so called underclass which doesn't give reliable evidence. The structural view argues that poverty still exists because society unfairly distributes its resources, so they blame society and not the attitudes of people. There are many arguments as to why society has failed to eliminate the poor society; some say it is the welfare system whilst others blame "lack of employment". David Cameron stresses the importance of discipline in schools and stresses how important it is to have a welfare system that does not support idleness. His party's work programme is another hope in getting the long term jobless into employment. The tory party's social policy guru Iain Duncan Smith believes Britain has witnessed the growth of a more menacing underclass. The cultural view to me seems

the more convincing, as I feel that these people actually exist. There are definitely people who live off benefits and are more than happy not to work. I also think that a percentage of these people are living off crimes they are committing by either stealing or dealing in drugs or even being dependant on drugs. I also think that some women have children just to get council accommodation and access to more benefits. I also believe that many men get women pregnant and don't take their role as fathers seriously and the majority deny that the child is even theirs, leaving the woman a single parent who is reliant on benefits. The underclass can be found on large council estates where most houses are occupied by single parents, whose kids lack a male role model and they often turn to crime to earn a living. I also agree about the benefit system getting changed and then maybe women would think twice about having children out of wedlock. I also believe more help should be given to get people into paid employment. Children need to be given strong advice about living this way and make them realise that it is unacceptable and that the cycle of poverty needs to be broken, so that the knock on effect stops and hopefully children will see that there are better things in life than sponging off the government and living on council estates.