

Development of the underclass in the 1990s



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Critically evaluate the research evidence in support of the contention that Britain developed an “ underclass in the 1990s?

What are the main differences between the use of underclass and the concept of social exclusion and why is the distinction important?

Introduction

The idea that society was stratified and inhabited by different classes of people dates back to the thought of Karl Marx. Marx saw capitalist society as exploitative and oppressive. Marx maintained that the conflicts between those who rule and those who are ruled, would eventually lead to changes in the economic system of a society (Marsh, I et al. 2000). According to Marx the blame for class exploitation does not lie with individual capitalists but is inherent in capitalist systems . Conflict and tension are also evident in capitalist systems. These are especially evident between between different groups of wage earners and between the ruling classes these would intensify due to a number of developments, namely polarisation, homogenisation, and pauperisation (Marsh, I et al. 2000).

Polarisation, Marx believed, would occur as a result of increasing tension and hostility between the ruling class and the working class, within the groups individuals would become more like each other resulting in homogenisation, capitalists in their desire for expansion and workers in their reliance on work in factories rather than on traditional skills. The success of capitalism meant that wages need to be kept down and the gap widened between employers and workers. In this way workers are made poorer, or become unemployed and are pauperised. Marx believed that this would result in social revolution

and the setting up of a new social system (Marsh, I et al. 2000). This did not happen and such pauperization, it might be argued became the basis for what Charles Murray (1990) has termed the development of an underclass.

This paper will evaluate evidence to assess whether and in what ways an underclass may be said to have developed in Britain during the 1990s. It will also look at the main differences between the concept of an underclass and the concept of social exclusion and why this distinction is important.

Charles Murray and the Underclass

Charles Murray is an American and his theory of the underclass was originally developed in over there. He saw an increase in violent crime, a rise in the number of illegitimate births and people dropping out from the labour force, it was on this basis that he formed his theory of a developing underclass. He then attempted to apply this theory to the UK where he observed similar phenomenon taking place. Some of his views led to heated debates, particularly with regard to single mothers, during the Thatcher and Major governments and under New Labour.

Unlike America, Britain is more of a welfare state, or was at the time, and he believed that the over provision of welfare services encouraged welfare dependency and a decreasing desire to work for a living (Murray, 1989). Greater welfare provision, he argued encouraged young girls to have children out of wedlock because they no longer had to rely on a man to support them and their child. The culture of dependency that Murray identified, did, he argued, have a generational aspect. Young males growing

up without proper role models ran wild and fathered illegitimate children themselves thus continuing a dependency culture.

Debates in England

His arguments were welcomed by the then Conservative Government who had already vowed to roll back the welfare state. Claiming themselves to be the party of the family (Giddens, 2001) they agreed with Murray that those who did not work should not have children. Those who did have children out of wedlock and could not support them should have their benefits stopped and be forced to give their children up for adoption. Throughout the 1990s this view was espoused by a number of British politicians who aired their views on television debating shows. Although this did not happen, successive Governments have tightened their hold on benefits purse strings and made life much harder for those who have to live on welfare benefits. This had further repercussions in policy making in the UK.

The Housing Act of 1996 was seen by many as a result of these debates and deleted some groups from local authority housing lists those people e. g. single mothers, who had been a priority when it came to local authority housing allocation, thus reducing the responsibility towards the homeless for local authorities. It also brought in the Single Persons Homeless Register, thus reducing responsibility for those who would have been seen as in priority need (Bramley et al, 2005). During this time increased unemployment left large numbers dependent on benefits. The number of those who are long-term unemployed also rose. Social changes and successive government policies has widened the gap between rich and poor. Field (1996) has argued that the actions of the Conservative Government in <https://assignbuster.com/development-of-the-underclass-in-the-1990s/>

targeting benefits through means testing, actually increased welfare dependency and put people into an inescapable poverty trap. Field further maintains that these policies were a major factor in the development of an underclass in Britain.

However, in Field's view the blame rests squarely on the shoulders of the Thatcher and Major governments.

The Underclass and Ethnicity

Some of Murray's views might be considered racist, in that he claims that black people are less intelligent than whites and black women are more likely to have illegitimate children and live on benefits. Giddens supports Murray's ideas of an underclass and (albeit for market reasons rather than the reasons given by Murray) also argues that a dual labour market is in operation and as a result of discrimination the underclass contains a high proportion of people from ethnic minorities. Much of what he has to say pre-empted Murray's work as it was written in 1973.

Where ethnic differences serves as a disqualifying market capacity, such that those in the category are heavily concentrated in the lowest paid occupations, or are chronically unemployed or self-employed, we may speak of the existence of an underclass (Giddens, 1973: 112).

Gaillie (1994) has questioned the arguments of Murray and Giddens. He disputes the idea that the underclass develops a specific culture and maintains that there is little evidence to support the existence of a dual labour market. He does however, acknowledge that the position of many people in the labour market has been weakened to the point where they are

working for slave wages. While this does tend to support the existence of an underclass, Gaillie refutes the notion that such groups are forming either a class or a culture.

Murray's Later Work

Writing in 1999 Murray observed that unemployment among young males was much higher than ten years earlier. He disputes the findings of others when he maintains that there was no evidence to suggest that this was the result of a shrinking market. He cites a rise in crime rates, particularly violent crime as further evidence that an underclass in Britain is developing in the same way as in America. These figures are however disputed by other theorists who would argue that although the crime rate is high it has been on a downturn. He also refers again to the number of single parent families, but figures in Britain evidence that the majority of single parent families are that way as a result of divorce or the death of a partner, rather than the never married single mother. Some of what Murray has to say takes little account of other social problems that may contribute to people living on the margins of society. Some of the groups that Murray refers to might be said to be socially excluded, but this is not the same thing as an underclass.

Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is a term used in a variety of ways but is generally seen to refer to those people who for one reason or another are not fully included in the social life of a community. The reasons for social exclusion are connected, and are poverty, unemployment, and a lack of education. These are not only reasons however, where a person lives, their ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities are also reasons why they might be regarded as

excluded. Government recognises that they cannot tackle social exclusion unless they adopt an approach that deals with all these issues together (ODPM, 2004). However, much Government discourse tends to make little distinction between the socially excluded and an underclass because many of its documents refer to single parent families, anti-social behaviour and youth crime. This is wrong because people can be socially excluded without being part of a sub-culture or underclass, if such a thing exists. Social exclusion is a process that stops people from fully participating in society (Giddens, 2001) whereas the concept of an underclass implies that some people choose to opt out of society.

Conclusion

Although there are times where Murray presents a convincing argument, it is not convincing enough to be able to say that there really is an underclass in Britain. Too many different forces could account for the increase in the number of people on benefits, not least a shrinking labour market which Murray refuses to acknowledge, even though many theorist will agree that this is a global phenomenon. Some points that he makes could place people in the category of socially excluded, but as this paper has attempted to establish that is not the same thing as being a member of an underclass. It is certainly the case that some groups of people are a lot less fortunate than others. Many single parents are forced to rely on benefits because if they go to work they will be even worse off. The costs of childcare are astronomical. In conclusion I would say that the evidence does not support Murray's theory of an underclass. It does tend to suggest that we live in a society where the gap between rich and poor gets wider every day. This in turn means that

people are excluded from full social participation e. g. many parents cannot afford for their children to go on school trips. People who live in poorer areas go to the worst schools and so exclusion becomes a vicious circle, but that is not the same thing as saying an underclass is developing in Britain.

Bibliography

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