# Critically assess the way in which the term 'underclass' essay sample

Social class is an extensive area of study in sociology. The existence of an underclass has often been questioned both because of the dubious history of such a distinction and how it has been applied and because it is not believed that such a distinction is empirically true. This essay attempts to critically assess the way in which the term is employed in contemporary political debate, and how it has influenced and shaped policy and law by focusing on the widespread riots of the 1980s and 90s when crime and public order achieved prominence in the sociological and political debate.

The underclass is an old historical phenomenon but during the steady growth in unemployment and the influence of the Thatcher ' New Right' government its reflection and implications have been much debated. The changing size and formation of British classes has been the focus of much sociological debate of the 20th century. Class is used to refer to such characteristics as social background, economic and employment situations and social groupings (Crompton 1996 p 19). Before the underclass can be described it is necessary to understand the term and definitions given to it.

In a literal sense it describes a group of people who do not belong to one of the three established classifications of social class. Alcock (1997) comments on how numerous studies have referred to the underclass as at the bottom of or even below the rest of society. Morris (1994) further comments that dependence on welfare has become the major defining feature of the underclass that the contempt of the underclass is ' a term applied to a group portrayed as living outside societies norms and values'.

The social exclusion implied appears to be crucial for understanding the difference between those who are simply in poverty, and those who belong to the ' underclass' this essay continues by attempting to assess in relation to this essay title. The term underclass is usually used to describe citizens in a disadvantaged position, such as the long tern unemployed or those in low paid low status jobs. Others who are identified as belonging to this category are pensioners, single parents families, the disabled, people who claim benefits or who are homeless, and black and ethnic minority groups.

Members of the underclass often suffer from disadvantages, not only in employment but housing and its demographic location, health, leisure and lifestyle, as well as political and social exclusion. Lister (1991) argues however that any attempt to categorise people as belonging to the underclass as a dangerous concept, as writers tend to use it to mean what they want it to mean. It is Charles Murray who has been arguably the most outspoken writer on the underclass over the past two decades.

Murray's thesis was developed in the USA in the 1980's but was also applied in the UK when it influenced Thatcher. His most recent his definition of the underclass reads, " By underclass I do not mean people who are merely poor but rather people at the margins of society, unsocialised and often violent, the chronic criminal is part of the underclass, especially the violent chronic criminal, but so are many parents who mean well but who cannot provide for themselves, who give nothing back to the neighbourhood and whose children are the despair of the teachers who have to deal with them".

Murray believes there are three indicators that identify an underclass. Illegitimacy among low-income young women; dropout from the labour force among low- income young men; and criminality (Murray 2001). How members of the underclass are regarded, and what measures should be taken to deal with them vary greatly depending on which political prospective is taken. The ' structural account' often associated with the left object to Murray's concept of the underclass as it stigmatises the poor and portrays them as being primarily responsible for their own poverty.

Mann (1998, p11) states that the protest to this concept is that the underclass are causalities due to the failure of the structure to produce full employment; and they are on the bottom of the social heap, which is inevitably due to the economic and structural forces of contemporary capitalism which has undermined traditional communities. There is little empirical evidence to support Murray's arguments, particularly those linking illegitimacy, and single-parent families, to crime.

Lister (1992), observes that the continual scapegoating of unemployed and single parent groups did not have the desired impact as intended, instead the public appeared to be more sympathetic to unemployed claimants than before the conservative government came to power. Other problems that have been highlighted include element of class bias, as it is assumed that it is always ' working class' lone parents or youth criminals. People in these situations and problems such as drug and alcohol abuse are not solely a working class phenomenon they are prevalent in all classes (Morrison 1995, p. 45).

This concept also separates poorest and most oppressed and exploited people from the rest of the working class and the labour movement, which further increases their vulnerability and their isolation. Marxists believe that the underclass arises as an inevitable side effect to capitalism and is used as a political tool as it de-focuses class consciousness (Kelly 1998, p 102). Although the term underclass is an ideologically neutral and useful concept that highlights groups usually excluded from class analysis, it has been arguably misused by Right-wing ideologists and politicians.

For those on the far Right the underclass represents just punishment for personal failings. Within this ' behavioural theory' they are portrayed by the New Right thinkers as lazy scroungers whose decline in moral values are responsible for crime, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity, vice, violence and vagrancy. Murray when called on to provide intellectual support to the governments plan to cut back on welfare spending claimed " a plague is spreading through our social fabric. Welfare benefits for single parents have encouraged the decline of the family.

This has encouraged a ' counter culture', which devalues work, and encourages criminality and a dependency-culture" (www. hewitt. norfork. sch. UK). The belief at this time was that the demand by welfare recipients for more benefits outstrip the capacity of the market economy to provide those benefits without losing its competitive edge (Morrison 1995, p. 419). Social rights refer to basic standards of material welfare and social opportunity guaranteed by the welfare state (Jewson 1990, p. 241). During Thatcher's term in office those rights suffered a full-frontal attack by the Conservative government's ' New Right' ideology.

Health, housing, education, and expenditure were all cut and this resulted in deepening poverty, neglect and despair. Hall (1985) states those who belong to the underclass began to feel that they were permanently out of sight of society at large and those who have no stake in society owe it nothing and have nothing but poverty and exclusion to lose (Hall 1985, p. 6). As the government cut social provisions for the disadvantaged in order to roll back the ' nanny state', which they believed, destroyed independence, initiative and self-respect and fostered dependency, the crime rate rose sharply (Tivey & Wright 1998, p. 23). Gordon (1971, p. 78) offers an explanation to this, "……… nearly all crimes in capitalist societies represent perfectly rational responses to the structure of institutes upon which capitalist societies are based.

Crime of many different varieties constitutes functionally similar responses to the organisation of capitalist institution, for those crimes help provide a means of survival in a society within which survival is never assured……… ghetto crime is committed by people responding quite reasonably to the structure of opportunities available to them" Gordon 1971, cited from Chambliss & Mankoff 1978). Kelly (1998) identifies that if co-operation and loyalty of citizens can no longer be assured through the provision of welfare benefits then due to increasing feelings of grievance again capitalist gain this resistance would then need to be meet with domineering and repressive measures (Kelly 1998, p. 101). This was indeed the case. The 1980s saw a marked increase in confrontation between police and sections of the public.

Widespread riots erupted in British inner cities whose intensity, size, duration and deepening frustration had no equal. They were dealt with by a major

change in policing strategies and tactics. The shift from a protective style in policing to one of a reactive role (Hall 1985, p. 10). The changing landscape due to New Right philosophy meant devastating cuts in housing, health, education, benefits and other welfare services. This hit inner cities harder than any other areas and was compounded by increased unemployment patterns of neglect and decay.

These estates became ' sink estates' which those who could afford to migrated and no one by choice would move in, many local amenities closed or had moved away and these estates were identified as losing there identity (Benyon 1989, p. 6). Growing levels of deprivation, poor health and general poverty produced an image of inner cities where rioting took place as being undesirable both psychologically and socially. Another key factor identified as a point of frustration felt by many inner city residents is the lack of political voice.

Citizenship rights include civil rights to equality before the law (Lister 1991). Explanations of riots draw attention to the fact that many of the people involved expressed feelings of injustice or lack of justice by those in authority. This was a factor highlighted in Lord Scarman's report published in 1984, which states " increasing resentment at perceived injustice leads to disenchantment with the established political procedures. This in turn leads to a lack of confidence and feeling of bitterness and frustration as to the legitimacy of political institutions and roles. (Open University 1985, p. 26).

This is expressed as civil indifference, a refusal to comply with laws and can lead to open conflict and violence (Benyon 1986, p. 7). One other extreme

theory of an underlying cause for the inner city disorders was put forward by Professor Derrick Bryce-Smith, who claimed that poisonous lead fumes from car exhausts helped spark the Brixton riots he explained it was absorbed into the brain and caused anti-social behaviour and that blacks absorbed more than whites.

This story appeared in the daily star on the 13th April 1981 and also claimed that due to the evidence the government was considering a cut in the amount of lead in petrol (Open University 1985). Where as the riots of the 1980s were identified as a response to social problems and police tactics mainly employed against the black population, the riots of the 1990s were harder to justify. Campbell (1993) writes " these riots lacked one thing that legitimises lawlessness: a just cause" (Campbell 1993, p. 204).

The riots that took place in the 1990s shared many of the same characteristics as the 1980s riots: most were on large council estates in low-income areas with a history of social problems (Power & Tunstall 1994). These estates had higher than average unemployment and a high concentration of young people but what was different from the 1980s riots, those involved were predominately young white British born males, who had felt increasingly, marginalized and socially excluded due to the lack of work opportunity and their economic situation it has left them in.

Power & Turnstall (1987) explained their riotous behaviour by saying " lack of work, lack of direction, lack of role and lack of independence lead to a pointless existence for many young men" leaving them with no stake in society. Another difference was that unlike the riots of the 1980s the 1990s

riots did not suddenly erupt: these were more a climax of breakdown of control and authority and escalated levels of law breaking.

Wadington's (1992) ' broken window' theory attempts to explain this he believed that if petty crime is not tackled it would escalate; this influenced policing policy to a zero tolerance style of policing as was seen in America. Waddingtons theory gained support the from the government as it advocates the notion of a ' pathological individual', where blaming the individual for their situation can be used to divert attention from structural problems, for which the government could be responsible.

Campbell's (1993, p. 03) view was that the riots of the 1990s was a masculine response to economic crisis the young men no longer had a role to aspire to the loss of traditional patterns of work and industry saw the loss of morality and behaviour learnt informally through family, the work process and social boundaries. There inability to cope and adapt to unemployment by men, brought crime and as their public disorder mascaline response to crisis. It appeared in connection to the widespread public disorder of the 1980s and 90s. The term was used as a ' whipping boy' they were regarded as dangerous and contaminated people.

Murray, for example, described himself as ' a visitor from a plague area come to see if the disease is spreading' (Murray 1989). This encourages a pathological image of people in poverty as somehow different and need to be feared (Lister 1991, p. 194), and shows a ' long tradition of class contempt for poor people (Campbell 1993, p. 98). The term underclass was applied by politicians and the media to groups of disadvantaged people who

were defined as a threat to social order. The fear of social unrest led to methods of ideological economic and political control methods being applied by the state and it's agencies.

The ' labelling' that the underclass was subjected to had consequences to how agencies responded to it, Cohen's (1973) theory tells us that ' deviancy amplification' that is the exaggerating and stereotypical fashion used by the mass media to describe events, was likely to see those who were labelled live up to this portrayed image (cited in Garrod 2001, p. 26). An article in the New Statesman (1993) called ' Why Crime is a Social Issue' Tony Blair first presented his ' tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', which many hoped would mean that the structural causes like inequality, poverty and exclusion may be addressed (Young 2002, p. 6).

Unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. In November 2002 Chancellor Gordon Brown made a speech outlining plans to tackle the ' unacceptable culture of worklessness, this has echo's of previous New Right thinking (Tempest 2002). This plan to tackle unemployment particularly in inner cities ' street by street' may well lead to unemployment becoming work placed poverty with people being forced in to low skilled low paid jobs. In conclusion the term ' underclass' is an ambiguous one.

What defines the members who belong to it has been the subject of much sociological debate ever since the term was first used. Its use is often usually negative and it refers to a disadvantaged position in society. The hard Right use the term to explain dependency on welfare handouts, social parasites who bleed resources, increase crime figures and lack motivation and levels

of moral decency. The left use the term to describe people who are unable to provide for themselves and their families due to structural conditions.

Incidents of crime tend to rise in times of economic problems this is often linked to a range of environmental conditions associated with poverty. During these times the impact of economic crisis and high levels of unemployment, society becoming more unsettled. The change brought about in the UK by the Conservatives during their term in government, must carry some of the responsibilities for the growth in numbers in an impoverished position and the increased level of crime and disorder that came about as response to this level of inequality.

The growth in unemployment and inequality led to social deprivation and frustration, the government then used a change in language and policies to attribute blame to those who found themselves in a disadvantaged position, this demoralization and political alienation led to open conflict and violence. Bachrach & Baratz (1970) describe riots as " the ballot boxes of the poor" (cited in Benyon 1996) and this would appear to be true. The role of the police and the power of the legal system was utilised in an attempt to manage demands and grievances, but this type of policing was heavily criticised as it often increases conflict.

The Thatcher period in office has been accused by King (1984) as a naive experiment in social engineering. What it did manage to cut back off the welfare state became greatly increased in expenditure on law and order (Tivey & Wright 1998, p. 123). It would appear that until society and government can create a more equal system for all, crime and social unrest

is a cultural and economic reality that will be ever with us, and it will continue to be up to the police to tackle the efforts of inequality until the state tackle the cause.