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Overcoming Essentialism: Notes On The Underclass Debate

(1) ORIGINS OF THE UNDERCLASS CONCEPT

According to the ideological individualism that accompanied the *laissez-faire* policies of the nineteenth century, a 'free market' allowed individuals to realise their ability to make wealth and, conversely, poverty was to be explained in terms of individuals' failures to 'get on'. When confronted by large scale economic hardship the response, though, was not to say that large numbers of working people were 'feckless'. Instead, the response was to modify the individualist conception of the economy, by making a distinction between (a) the 'deserving poor' who were poor because of a difficult situation, and who would eventually work their way out of poverty; and (b) the 'undeserving poor', who brought poverty upon themselves, by being unable to work in gainful employment. Thus the notion of a class 'under' the working class developed as a way to explain long-term poverty in terms which blamed the individuals concerned. Whilst it was recognised that capitalism (or at least the form of capitalism operating at the time) may create economic distress for individuals who did work hard, the belief in *laissez-faire* could be defended by saying that individuals who were not feckless would escape poverty, whilst the feckless would always be in self-inflicted poverty. So, for the working class/deserving poor, poverty would be caused by capitalism, and overcome by individuals, whereas for the underclass/undeserving poor, poverty would be caused by individual failings, and would be impossible to overcome. In which case *laissez-faire* could be justified along the lines that individuals were ultimately responsible for their fate, and if nascent welfare were increased then this would only support a feckless underclass.

These views can be illustrated by turning to the works of two nineteenth century commentators, *viz.* Mayhew and Booth. Mayhew, in the mid-nineteenth century, talked of a 'substratum' which was distinct from the working class. After recognising that casual and sweated labour in London would create conditions whereby work was insecure and gruelling, Mayhew made a distinction between casual labourers and vagrants. The former may experience poverty but could work their way out of this, whilst the latter brought poverty upon themselves. This latter group were innately feckless: the vagrants, *i.e.* the substratum, could not support themselves because they were a biologically inadequate sub-race. In trying to distinguish such a group, Mayhew listed some physical and social traits, such as 'high cheek bones and protruding jaws', 'slang language', 'repugnance to continuous labour', and 'love of cruelty' (Mayhew in Himmelfarb, cited in Morris 1994:17).

Similarly, in the late 1880s, Booth carried out a survey of London which found that one third of the population

lived in poverty, including members of the labouring poor. This could have challenged any notion of an underclass of feckless individuals, as it would seem that economic-structural factors were the cause of poverty. However Booth drew a different conclusion. He argued that there existed a 'residuum' constituted by feckless individuals who would corrupt workers. He described the residuum as '[o]ccasional labourers, street-sellers, loafers, criminals and semi-criminals [... who] degrade whatever they touch and as individuals are incapable of improvement' (Keating cited in Morris 1994: 21-2).

The notion of a biologically distinct underclass persisted into the twentieth century, although by the 1960s and 1970s biology was replaced by 'culture'. In the USA the debate turned upon the notion of a 'culture of poverty', whilst in the UK the debate turned upon the notion of a 'cycle of deprivation'. In both cases the argument was that poverty was caused by a situation whereby children were socialised into 'deviant' norms. The argument was that children would be brought up by single mothers who could not discipline the children, or in dysfunctional families; the children would be socialised into expecting welfare support instead of supporting themselves through work; and given the lack of any sense of self-responsibility (from supporting oneself via work), the children might turn to crime when older. Such a view was famously championed by Keith Joseph, who described how there was an 'inter-generational transmission of poverty', caused by inadequate socialisation leading to unemployment and unstable families, which continued the dysfunctional rearing of children (Bagguley and Mann 1992:121).

The purpose in making such arguments was not now to distinguish a deserving from an undeserving poor because, whilst there were still poor people, it was assumed that modern welfare had removed extreme poverty. Indeed, it was thought that such 'generous' welfare had encouraged the development of an underclass. In which case, the purpose of the culturalist arguments was to argue for reduced welfare and increased policing of benefits, together with a 'crackdown' on crime, to prevent young underclass men using crime to avoid work. In other words, the culturalist arguments supported new right politics, based on the neo-liberal emphasis on 'markets' and the neo-conservative emphasis on law and order.

(2) ESSENTIALISM AND POLITICS

Clearly, both the biological and the culturalist arguments about an underclass are essentialist, because the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of individuals in the (putative) underclass are held to conform to certain fixed 'essential properties'. Such an essentialism would obviously be antithetical to social science because it would entail a specious reduc-

tionism and determinism, whereby complex social relations were reduced down to some single cause (biological or cultural), which determined individuals to behave in a deviant fashion. This did not prevent the Eugenics Society (of Britain), in the early twentieth century, from trying to prove their conviction that the ‘social problem group’ (i.e. ‘dys-functional’ families living in poverty who may also commit crime) existed, and could be proved to exist via a study of family lineage. However, the Eugenics Society failed to find ‘sufficient’ evidence to support this conviction, although it retained the belief that eventually such evidence could be procured (Macnicol 1987). One consequence of this failure was to prevent the implementation of a recommendation to sterilise members of the underclass, put forward in the 1929 Wood Report (Macnicol 1987).

Problems with trying to operationalise such an essentialist ontology of social being, to verify that behaviour necessarily conformed to some fixed essential property, did not concern the earlier nineteenth century biological arguments, nor the later culturalist arguments in the twentieth century. The reason here was that essentialism was needed to *construct* an homogeneous deviant group: essentialism allowed the construction of a negative stereotype which held, as stereotypes do, that all individuals within the category concerned had identical attitudes and forms of behaviour. In other words, the concept of an underclass arose to justify an individualist ideological commitment to ‘free-market’/anti-welfare politics, by negatively stereotyping poor people, or some poor people. This would then allow poverty to be ‘explained away’ by ‘blaming the victims’, with the invocation of a stereotype which held that the poor were ‘feckless’ deviants innately incapable of work, or unsocialised into self-sufficiency.

This is not to imply that the construction of an homogeneous group, or the construction of a negative stereotype, was cynically performed in the knowledge that it was false. For instance, Joseph commissioned the SSRC (Social Science Research Council) to investigate his claim that there was a ‘cycle of deprivation’. The SSRC found that this was not so, due to the fact that half the children born into poor homes move out of such disadvantage, and half those who experience disadvantage were not born into disadvantaged homes (Rutter and Madge 1976:304). Joseph’s reaction to this was to denounce the SSRC and social science more generally. An atomistic conception of the social realm precluded the legitimacy, for Joseph, of a study into how individuals interact with objective structural factors, such as economic decline. Consequently, instead of studying how poverty may be at least partly caused by situational factors beyond individuals’ control, Joseph sought to defend a particular ideological conviction, which was mistakenly held to be a true explanation of the social realm.

(3) RATIONAL CHOICE AND STRUCTURAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE UNDERCLASS: BEYOND ESSENTIALISM?

(3.1) Murray and rational choice

Like Joseph, Murray seeks to defend a new right approach

to policy formation, which seeks to reduce welfare, but unlike Joseph, Murray eschews a culturalist explanation. Although Murray does not explicitly say his approach is based upon rational choice theory, his conception of the underclass has clear affinities with that theory. Murray takes individuals as having fixed preferences, which are not in need of explanation, and assumes that individuals seek the most instrumentally rational means to achieve their ends (i.e. the realisation of their preferences). Instead of dealing with how preferences may be socially mediated, Murray takes materialist preferences as ‘given’, and places the focus on how individuals instrumentally seek to realise preferences, which are understood in terms of material acquisitiveness.

Specifically, as regards the underclass issue, Murray’s argument is that changes in welfare policy made it more rational for individuals to live on benefits as opposed to supporting themselves through work. Murray argues that

[t]here is no need to invoke the spectres of cultural pathologies or inferior upbringing. The choices may be seen much more naturally, as the behaviour of people responding to the reality of the world around them and making the decisions – the legal, approved, and even encouraged decisions – that maximise the quality of their life (1984:162).

Given this, the formation of the underclass in the USA

... could have been predicted (indeed, in some cases, was predicted) from the changes that social policy made in the rewards and penalties, *carrots and sticks*, that govern human behaviour. All were *rational responses to the changes in the rules of the game of surviving and getting ahead* (1984:154-5. Emphasis added).

The changes to the rules of the game that concern Murray relate to changes made to AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) in the 1960s. He argues that changes to AFDC meant that single mothers received higher benefits than before, that single mothers were allowed to cohabit (providing that their partner was not the father of the child), and that some money from paid employment was allowed without loss of benefit.

To discuss the ramifications of these changes Murray uses an hypothetical couple called Harold and Phyllis who are described as being of average intelligence, with no skills and from a poor background. Murray argues that, before the reforms to AFDC, Harold could not live with Phyllis and a low paid job would pay more than welfare. After the reforms, though, they could live together (providing Harold was not the legal father of any children Phyllis might have, in which case there would be financial disincentives), with one partner having a job, without losing benefits. There was also a disincentive to get married as this would incur financial penalties (and by not getting married Harold retains the option to leave Phyllis and her children). Further, Murray argues that social stigma was removed from welfare, with reformers failing to distinguish the deserving poor from the undeserving poor, presenting all poor people as victims, and welfare as a ‘right’. What this means therefore is that, after the reforms, it is more rational for Harold to live on benefits, simultaneous-

ly moving in and out of work with no negative repercussions for benefit entitlement if he simply gives up a job, and to live unmarried with Phyllis. Before this, it would have been more rational for Harold to stay in a job (hopefully working his way up) and then marry Phyllis so that he could live with her.

Although many people experiencing chronic unemployment in the USA are black, Murray does not think that racism, or any reference to factors specific to ethnic minorities, is warranted. His view is that any rational individual, when confronted with rules which make welfare an attractive option, will seek to live on welfare, rather than take a poorly paid job (as their sole income) and work their way up (even though this may be more rational in the long term). Rational individuals will respond to external stimuli which, in this case, make it expedient to claim welfare.

Behaviourist homogenisation

Now as Hindess argues, a problem with rational choice theory is that it ends up as a form of determinism. He argues that whether one adheres to an holistic approach or rational choice theory, it is the case that

... actors are creatures of their situations and they act accordingly: in one case because they pursue the most rational course of action given the situation in which they find themselves and in the other because they have internalised the appropriate norms and act upon them. [...] The mechanism by which individuals are subordinated to their situations may be different in the two cases, but the overall result is the same (1988:39).

What this indicates is that rational choice theory is similar to behaviourism. Although rational choice theory makes reference to 'preferences', whereas behaviourism would make no reference to 'inner states', rational choice theory does not explore how preferences are formed, and instead they are taken as 'givens'. Further such preferences are (usually held to be) for materialist ends. Therefore when the rational individual – or *homo economicus* – seeks the most efficient means to realise their materialist end, the means available constitute positive reinforcement stimuli, whilst less instrumentally rational courses of action available in any particular situation constitute negative reinforcement stimuli. For both rational choice theory and behaviourism the individual's behaviour is determined by external factors.

All individuals who seek the most efficient means to realise their materialist ends will follow behaviour *A* over behaviour *B* if *A* is the most efficient means *qua* positive reinforcement stimuli. For example, if *A* means that one can claim relatively generous welfare (and maybe do some work occasionally), and *B* means avoiding very low welfare to stick at a low paid job which paid more than welfare, then rational individuals (who are unemployed and unskilled) would chose *B* unless a better option such as *A* emerged, in which case they would all pursue option *A*. Thus a change to the social situation, meaning a change to the carrots and sticks, or incentives and disincentives, would lead to a concomitant change in behaviour.

Such a position is essentialist because one is using a

definitive ontology of human being: one describes individuals as instrumentally rational and materially acquisitive, and then one can say how all individuals (or all rational/ non-pathological individuals) would behave in any given situation, which is precisely what Murray does, with his discussion of Harold and Phyllis. This not only precludes any analysis of how individuals interact with social structural factors (such as economic decline), it fails to explain why it is that people not born into poverty become trapped in poverty, or why people born into poor households may escape poverty. It also leads on to an homogenisation of poor people. This is because one would be in the position of arguing that all individuals who are from poor backgrounds, with no skills, and average intelligence, will necessarily seek the most efficient route to material gratification, which is welfare; and so all people on welfare (or at least all medium to long term claimants) will have acted upon the same stimuli (and will have the same preferences).

This suggests that Murray might be moving toward a culturalist view after all, as all members of the underclass would have shared preferences which led on to shared behaviour (living on welfare). Consequently there would be a shared culture whereby self-seeking individuals regarded it as normal to live on welfare and avoid permanent work. Moreover, Murray does, as noted above, make a distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. So whilst it may be rational to live on welfare, meaning that such individuals are not pathological in the sense that they are irrational, individuals who live on welfare when they could work are pathological in the sense that they violate norms about self-reliance via paid work. Such individuals are pathological in the sense that they are irresponsible: they live off the state instead of taking responsibility for supporting themselves.

Such irresponsibility also extends to family relations. Hence Murray says that in addition to financial disincentives to marry, remaining unmarried also leaves Harold with the (presumably desired) freedom to walk out on Phyllis and her children. Implicit here is the notion that as individuals are self-seeking, they will eschew bonds of family responsibility as these do not promote material self-interest. This may be rational in a narrowly instrumental fashion, but it is pathological with regard to social norms about family responsibilities.

No social mediation

So the position is that underclass individuals may be rational, and so non-pathological in the sense that they are not irrational, but they are pathological with regard to social conventions regarding norms about working to support oneself and taking responsibility for a family. Such pathology, though, may not seem all that important, because it concerns normative judgements, about conduct which is rational, and this rationality, rather than the socially-relative or subjective nature of normative judgements, is what is more important. Indeed, for a rational choice theorist one cannot begin to link behaviour to social norms, as this

would be to move away from taking preferences as fixed, to focus on their social mediation; and if one did this then one would, *ex hypothesi*, be holding that individuals were 'cultural dopes', determined by prevailing norms, as the individual would no longer be the independent variable. (For rational choice theory there is a stark choice between putting all the emphasis on individuals or all the emphasis on structures).

Given this, if one wanted to argue against the underclass existing, one would have to say that welfare dependency is an illegitimate 'cost' to taxpayers, and by changing the relevant dis/incentives one could overcome the problem of welfare dependency immediately. From knowing the essential defining properties of human being (*viz.* the instrumentally rational pursuit of material self-interest) one could know, *a priori*, that a change in the positive and negative reinforcement stimuli would necessarily result in a corresponding change to behaviour.

At this point one may ask why it is that anyone in a position similar to Harold and Phyllis would take a low paid job over welfare. Given Murray's views there ought to be no-one doing any menial work. This raises the issue of 'differential rationality', whereby it may seem as if those who do work without being promoted are less rational. Or, conversely, it may be that it is less rational to rely on welfare when one could have a greater income in the long term if one delayed gratification to work long hours in a low paid job initially. To decide whether members of the underclass are actually pathological in the sense of being less rational than others (and therefore being inadequate with regard to the defining essence of social agents), one would have to turn to the conditions of the labour market, and argue that if there were equality of opportunity then members of the underclass would be pathological, and if such conditions were limited then they would not be pathological.

(3.2) Murray and the culturalist explanation

Murray does not attempt such an enormous task as trying to establish to what extent the liberal principle of equality of opportunity obtains (in the USA). Instead, the underclass are simply held to be acting rationally so that the real blame can be put upon the 'liberal' (in the North American sense of the term) 'do-gooder' reformers, who fail to understand *people*. Having said this, though, Murray does shift his ground, moving from a basically rational choice view to a culturalist view. Rather than be in a situation whereby underclass individuals are non-pathological because they are *rational* (or maybe less rational and so pathological), he moves to the view that underclass individuals are pathological because they fail to conform to social norms about self-reliance via work and family responsibility.

Such views are made clear when Murray discusses the underclass in Britain. In his initial comments (1990), he argued that an underclass was forming in Britain because children were socialised into welfare dependency by single mothers, and, with no (working present) father to instill a

work ethic or discipline, the children would 'run wild'. Further, as male children would grow up without being socialised into taking responsibility for themselves by working and supporting a family, they might turn to crime as a quick way to get money, which would help pay for drugs that give meaning to a life with no stable family commitments.

Recently Murray has returned to Britain, writing in the *Sunday Times* that there is an established underclass in Britain now, and that violent crime is higher in Britain than in the USA. As regards the work ethic, Murray argues that

[d]ropout from the labour force among young adult males is an important indicator that an underclass has formed because it reflects such a clear departure from the age-old norm that young adult males work regularly – supporting wives and children, siblings or parents, or at least supporting themselves (2000:1).

As such individuals are not socialised into work and responsibility they seek immediate gratification, which can be obtained from violent crime such as 'mugging'. On this Murray argues that

[T]he link between the rise in violent crime and my arguments about the underclass is direct. Over the past two decades, larger and larger numbers of British children have not been socialised into norms of self-control, consideration for others and the concept that actions have consequences. One of the leading reasons is that larger and larger numbers of British children are not being raised by two mature, married adults (2000:1).

Here the emphasis is not just on socialisation and welfare dependency but also on the need for children to be born into married families, with families consisting of a single mother and her children being deemed pathological and dysfunctional, because the children could not grow up to accept 'normal behaviour' based on responsibility. Thus we have moved from an essentialism whereby we can predict how people will behave on the basis of conceptualising individuals as materialistic calculating 'computers', to return to the notion of an homogeneous deviant culture determining the behaviour of those socialised into deviant norms.

(3.3) Wilson and the structuralist explanation

Wilson (1987) rejects the idea that an underclass has developed because of increases to welfare. He argues that the underclass ought to be diminishing as the real value of welfare has decreased since the 1970s. A black underclass exists in the USA, according to Wilson, because of structural factors, meaning economic decline. Specifically, he argues that the long-term decline of manufacturing in the inner-cities since the 1970s has created chronic unemployment. It has also led to a rise in children brought up by single mothers, because there is a lack of young men with jobs to marry (assuming that young women would only want to marry a 'breadwinner').

The consequence of such chronic unemployment is the decline of civil society and any notion of 'community', creating a ghetto with a high crime rate. The reasoning here is that with long-term economic decline, middle class and working class black families leave the inner-city,

which means that institutions such as churches, schools, shops, and recreational facilities, close down, and stable families, which could provide role-models, leave the area. With such a decline of civil society there arises a 'ghetto-specific culture', based upon welfare dependency, single motherhood, and high crime (especially violent crime).

This may seem similar to the culturalist arguments described above, but Wilson rejects culturalist arguments, describing them as tautological: values are inferred from behaviour and then used to explain that behaviour (1987:15). For Wilson the culture of the ghetto is caused by economic decline and can be overcome by economic regeneration. There would be quite a mechanical materialism involved here, although Wilson tries to avoid this by saying that there are no *a priori* grounds to say that culture may not become autonomous. However, Wilson does give us an essentialist view of the underclass, predicated upon a culturalist argument, because he is arguing that children are socialised into deviant norms. Therefore even if the economy did regenerate in inner-city areas, this would not remove the underclass, because they would not be socialised into norms concerning work.

In a later work, Wilson (1991) drops the term 'underclass', using instead the term 'ghetto-poor', but his argument supports a culturalist conception of the underclass. This is clear from his view that children of the ghetto poor are socialised into a culture where the lack of regular employment leads to an 'incoherent world', where meaning is derived from the present, and no long-term perspective can be sustained (1991:10). In which case economic development and the return of working families (assuming they would return to a 'ghetto') could do nothing to remove an underclass, as underclass adults would have a culture that was antithetical to mainstream values about work and families, and which determined their behaviour.

(4) OVERCOMING ESSENTIALISM: 'FIDDLY JOBS' AND SOCIAL REALISM¹

From what has been argued it may well seem as if the notion of an 'underclass' is an intrinsically essentialist concept which, directly (as with Murray) or indirectly (as with Wilson), will support a right-wing ideological view of poor people. Such a view maintains that certain types of poor people are poor because their behaviour is determined by an homogeneous deviant culture. That such essentialist homogenisation would, as Bagguley and Mann note (1992:115-6), be based upon the 'ecological fallacy' of deriving individual characteristics from aggregate census data concerning crime and unemployment, is not important for ideologues. Instead of arguing about how to interpret data, the view would be that an underclass is known to exist, and it could be defined in a circular fashion, using putative norms to explain behaviour which is then explained in terms of norms; with homogenisation existing because all underclass individuals conform to the norms posited about crime and welfare dependency. Or to put it another way, essentialism underpins a negative stereotype of unemployed people.

One may of course turn to a rational choice perspective, but this would still turn on an essentialism, concerning human being rather than culture. Indeed, it may be similar in some ways to the nineteenth century biological arguments, because assuming that there were some form of equality of opportunity, then the underclass would be less rational than 'normal people' in choosing not to enter full-time work. In other words, there would be a group of people innately less able because they were less rational. Or, conversely, if opportunities were limited then those in poorly paid manual work would be less rational than the underclass.

Given the essentialism involved in the history of the underclass topic, it is not surprising that some dismiss the concept altogether. Thus Morris and Irwin (1992), for instance, argue that, instead of talking about an underclass (even if it is held that this class has no deviant culture different from the working class), it is more useful to talk about different strata within the working class, and relate periods of unemployment to these strata. Thus, using the Registrar General's class scheme, they argue that individuals from class V (unskilled) are more likely to experience longer term unemployment than individuals in class 3m (skilled manual), because they have a weaker labour market position.

Overlooking the problems with using such an occupational scheme to define social class, and Morris and Irwin's study of people gaining access to formal jobs via the utilisation of social networks, I want to focus on an article by MacDonald (1994). This article deals with how unemployed people in Cleveland, an area suffering from long-term decline in manufacturing, use social networks to gain access to 'fiddly jobs', meaning jobs undertaken (illegally) whilst claiming benefit.

MacDonald does not enter into discussion about the underclass concept, focussing instead on empirical research into how people cope with long-term unemployment. This research shows that individuals who know the 'right people' and the 'right pubs' are able to gain work from sub-contractors to work (without insurance) in the remaining industrial plants (although fiddly work may also include jobs such as taxi driving, window cleaning, etc.). Such work is regarded by those within the area (even those not doing such work through lack of contacts or fear of being caught) as legitimate, because it is needed to support a family. Whilst people are opposed to benefit fraud for profit alone, complementing welfare with some other income is deemed acceptable. Whereas a professional criminal might make large sums from fraud, those employed in fiddly jobs earn very low wages, and this income is deemed necessary to help support families. For example, one twenty five year old man with a wife and two children worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, doing cleaning and maintenance work in a steel plant, for sixty pounds a week (1994:514-5).

So whilst those who wish to stereotype unemployed people construct an image of welfare-dependency replacing the notion that one must support oneself through work,

MacDonald's study shows that, whilst there is small-scale fraud, the people engaged in such activity (and those in the area who are not engaged in such activity) do adhere to the ethic of working to support oneself. Instead of choosing welfare over work, with welfare being a 'right', chronic unemployment was created by economic decline, and individuals actively seek work, even if it is poorly paid work for long hours with no industrial insurance, to complement welfare and avoid acute poverty. Indeed, for people to get fiddly jobs they need a reputation as a 'hard worker' which, given the conditions involved, means that such people would have to work extremely hard, in relation to those in conventional/formal employment.

The only problem with MacDonald's study is that there is an implicit methodological – rather than ideological – individualism. This is because all the reference is to individuals, who get access to fiddly jobs, or not, by knowing the 'right people' and doing the 'right thing' (working in poor conditions without complaining). Further, when discussing values about fiddly jobs, the reference could be framed in terms of individuals and their 'dispositions' (which is classical individualist terminology) because the theory only conceptualises individual agents, their actions, and their beliefs (dispositions).

Social structural realism

To get a deeper purchase on the situation, it is necessary to explain how individuals are enabled and constrained by an objectively real social context. To do this we can draw upon the social realist work of Archer (1995). Archer argues that social structures can be conceptualised as possessing 'emergent properties', which means that whilst the activity of individuals in the *past* created structures, social structures are not activity-dependent in the *present tense*, because they have an existence in their own right. For example, capitalism arose from actions of individuals several centuries ago, but is irreducible to individuals' actions in the here and now. This does not mean that social structures are just an external (determining) constraint upon agents though. Structures enable as well as constrain, because individuals have free will, and their activities are also mediated within some social context, which gives meaning to activities and opportunities for certain types of action. Also, Archer argues that culture is emergent too, meaning that belief systems are irreducible to individuals' beliefs.

Using this meta-theory provided by Archer we can re-work MacDonald as follows. The economic situation (industrial decline) is a structural situation, furnishing a social context where there are certain constraints and potential enablements. The constraints turn on the type of work available and the possibility of becoming more affluent, and here individuals have a limited horizon of choice. This is not to say individuals are simply rendered passive by the change in circumstance. Whilst some unemployed people may lose contact with people and become socially isolated, others can use the new enablements presented, and seek a different form of work.

In doing this, the people engaged in fiddly jobs are deviant in the legal-positivist sense that they are breaking the law, but they are not deviant in the sense that they adhere to a deviant sub-culture, whereby welfare is sought over work; or family responsibility eschewed. Instead, individuals work to support themselves and their families in an attempt to avoid acute poverty. This means that that such individuals are interpreting a cultural emergent property (of 'cultural system'), which we may call the 'work ethic', in a particular way, to suit their circumstances. These individuals (or 'cultural agents') would therefore be in conflict with right-wing ideologues, who draw upon the same cultural emergent property, in a different way, in an attempt to stereotype and stigmatise unemployed people.

A social realist meta-theory is not simply an extra 'addon'. It is necessary because one's conception of social ontology will influence methodology. To draw upon a notion of structures as enabling and constraining is to link structure and agency, which means that research will set out to focus upon how individuals face particular sets of limits on, and potential opportunities for, action (and, correspondingly, how individuals may rework the situation in which they find themselves, to change the social structures over time). Conversely, if one held to an individualist ontology, whether implicitly or explicitly, then ultimately one could not say how an objectively real social context influenced individuals' actions. There would be just individuals, their actions and their beliefs. One consequence of this could be a return to political-ideological individualism, because reference to social contexts is replaced with reference to individuals' actions, read: merit.

If one were driven more by ideology than sensitivity to real situations, one could presumably say that individuals who engage in fiddly jobs could use their energies in a more efficient fashion by becoming self-employed. Interestingly enough, MacDonald (1996) did a study of self-employed people in the same region. His argument was that, contrary to right-wing rhetoric, such people did not 'succeed' by hard work in contrast to the laziness of the unemployed. Rather, the self-employed chose to use money from the state designed to help small businesses, to try and avoid unemployment, and most of these businesses failed. Whereas those in fiddly jobs took money from the state illegally and worked hard on a low income, the self-employed took money from the state legally, and many ended up unemployed after working hard to get the business going. All of which returns us to the need to examine how the social context sets up particular configurations of enablements and constraints for individuals.

Re-thinking 'underclass'

Finally, there is the issue of the underclass concept itself. Although it has an essentialist and politicised history, there is a need to recognise that, *contra* Morris and Irwin, people experiencing a long-term period away from formal employment (who are capable of work) are in a different situation from the 'working class'. It might be controversial, but it can be argued that one ought to retain the concept of an

'underclass', but utilise it in a different fashion, using a social realist perspective to understand the lives of people experiencing chronic (formal) unemployment. As will be clear from the above argument, this avoids essentialism and does not do conceptual violence to the fabric of individual lives by stereotyping them. By reinventing the meaning of the term underclass it is possible to rebut directly the previous essentialism, and avoid implicit individualism.

Notes

1. Sayer 1997 argues against what he calls 'misplaced essentialism', such as the view that there is an homogenous group defined and determined by some essence (such as gender identity or deviant sub-culture). This ought not to lead us to accept currently fashionable strong constructionism though, which rejects any notion of extra-discursive referents, as this falls into relativism, which precludes analysis and critique, by making it impossible to distance oneself from the prevailing norms. Instead we ought to recognise that social science discourse is always situated within some perspective and that this pertains to some referent beyond the perspective. For Sayer this means recognising that there are certain 'essential properties', in that reality puts limits on our descriptions of it. This however is not 'essentialist', because we do not have a direct access to facts qua essences, and instead we have a meta-theory of emergent properties to guide fallible truth claims.

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CAMBRIDGE REALIST WORKSHOP

Reunion Conference

CRITICAL REALISM IN ECONOMICS: WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

May 5–7, 2000
Cambridge University

Organising committee

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Cambridge Realist Workshop

<http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/seminars/realist/index.htm>

MORPHOGENESIS - CALL FOR PAPERS

Call for papers for a panel at the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco, November 2000, on Margaret Archer's morphogenetic social theory. Archer draws on Roy Bhaskar's critical realism to devise a powerful mode of sociocultural analysis which is just beginning to find its way into American anthropology. The panel will be a forum for dialogue on both theoretical and ethnographic applications of morphogenesis, and the account of emergence of novel forms in both culture and society.

If interested, or if you know of scholars who might be interested, please contact Derek Brereton: (734) 973-7693, DPBrereton@aol.com.