

Criminal justice, corporate government and popular opposition

Matt Clement considers social classes under strain at times of austerity



It is now official: the 'precariat', a term sometimes used to describe the lowest income rung on the class ladder, has been discovered and institutionalised in the index of seven classes recently unveiled by the British Sociological Association. They represent the bottom 15 per cent of the population, those with a household income of less than £8,253 after tax. They are not all unemployed; some work as cleaners, van drivers, care workers, cashiers etc. (Savage et al., 2013). If they have families they rely on tax credits and housing benefits to survive, branding them with the stigma of the coalition government's latest attacks on welfare.

Whatever we think of the value of this way of measuring social classes – and there are certainly anomalies within the survey findings – it raises questions about how the kaleidoscope of classes is shifting under the strain of economic crisis presided over by a government so clearly representing the top class in the survey – the 6 per cent elite. The bottom four rungs of the ladder – respectively the 'emergent service workers', the traditional working class and above them the 'new affluent workers' – all earn less than £30,000 total household income a year. This is surely little enough to make most of these people feel that their grip on sustainable living is rather precarious, especially in London where prices are highest. Furthermore, this group of four, as

measured in the BBC 2011 *Great British Class Survey* – once adjusted with a more representative sample of the population – amounts to 63 per cent of the population, implying that it is 'the masses' as a whole whose working and living conditions might be described as precarious. This is, of course, nothing new – but is arguably a condition that has accompanied the working class in Britain since the Industrial Revolution.

The end of apprenticeship regulations in 1813, the increase in the supply of labour as population rose...saw the work divided between the honourable 'society' men, where the craft workshops kept control, and the dishonourable trades, controlled by the subcontractors, garret masters and sweaters (Morris, 1979)

The urban working classes

If urban life was precarious for many 200 years ago, the extent to which these massively swollen populations were unable to maintain themselves through secure employment grew exponentially through the first half of the nineteenth century as men, women and children laboured incessantly in mills and factories, constantly threatened by overwork and unemployment. Chartism and Trade Unionism were a product of the need to resist the remorseless levelling down of wages driven by the search for profit.

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Such opposition was regarded as criminal, as exemplified by the argument of Lord Braxfield in a state trial persecuting political reformers who had the temerity to campaign for democracy and popular justice:

A government should be just like a Corporation, and in this country it is made up of the landed interest; which alone has the right to be represented; as for the rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation of them? (in Briggs, 1959)

The poor are a 'rabble', they are characterised by their lack of property – therefore they are the mobile population or, to use the term derived from Ancient Rome, the proletariat. This phenomenon was understood as 'the mob'. Mobs tend to riot when circumstances provoke people beyond endurance, and did so regularly through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Eric Hobsbawm cited 'the lazzaroni of Naples, the quintessential "mob"', explaining that their actions targeted 'any owners of property, or more simply, anyone with a carriage. This proclivity has time and again tempted unsympathetic observers... to present it as a collection of lumpenproletarians and criminals out for loot.' (Hobsbawm, 1959) Riots were more occasional but still a regular feature in the twentieth century in Britain – although relatively infrequent during the post-war welfare consensus years of 1945-1975. Since then, of course, the riots of the 1980s heralded their periodic return through the next two decades.

Twenty-first century conditions

In the twenty-first century, as the UK's minimum wage economy grows; alongside casualisation and deregulation, we see the scars of austerity measures once again generating social harm on a rising scale. At the same time, the appetite to criminalise and stigmatise is growing, especially as such actions are judged 'popular' by the media and politicians become ever more resolute in drafting laws that blame the poor for their poverty. This was the discontented context of the summer of discontent, the 2011 riots (Briggs, 2012). As a result, the return of the mob – a crowd whose actions are judged a threat to social order – became a reality, and the topic of a host of news headlines on 9 August 2011:

- *The Independent*: 'Mob rule'
- *Daily Star*: 'Anarchy in the uk'
- *Daily Mirror*: 'YOB RULE'
- *Daily Express*: 'Flaming morons – thugs & thieves terrorise Britain's streets'
- *Daily Telegraph*: 'Rule of the mob'

It felt like a re-run of the 1980s riots – sparked by a police killing that appeared to betray again the promise of an end to institutional racism. Such barbaric treatment demanded a response from the enraged minority in Tottenham, spreading from a localised 'immediate riot' into a national wave of mobilisations: 'an immediate riot spreads not by displacement, but by imitation' (Badiou, 2012). In a confused and destructive way, many people protested against their brutalised conditions, provoking a bout of wilfully blind repression from government and the police determined to 'clean up' their cities. The *Daily Mail's* headline for that day summed it up 'THE ANARCHY SPREADS – to blame the cuts is immoral and cynical. This is criminality pure & simple'.

But what are we to make of this summer of discontent? Were the

English riots of August 2011 also political? Or were they merely an outbreak of criminal opportunism by the nation's dispossessed? Were these mobs reactionary or revolutionary – alienated 'shoplifters' or protesting citizens?

Margaret Thatcher also hated 'mobs'. These were her words during the miners' strike of 1984-1985, when she also infamously aped Cicero and denounced them as 'the enemy within':

I must tell you that what we've got is an attempt to substitute the rule of the mob for the rule of law. And it must not succeed.

She saw herself in a battle for the survival of her brand of regime against a section of the working class determined to remain organised, nationalised and above all employed on terms and conditions that allowed them some respect and security. She had defeated other 'mobs', groups of thousands of workers on the railways, in hospitals, steel plants and shipyards and thus weakened trade union power, but without defeating the miners the Thatcherite revolution to strengthen capital and weaken the forces of labour might have faltered.

Just as a mobilisation of miners at Saltley Gates in Birmingham in 1972 had been a landmark victory for the miners, and an unbearable challenge which her predecessor, Edward Heath had lost: so a defeat for the massed ranks of pickets at Orgreave, South Yorkshire, in 1984 – battered away from blocking coal supplies by legions rioting police – broke the confidence of the miners in their ability to defeat the government once again. The closure of almost the entire national coalfield followed in its wake: this explains the enthusiasm shown for Thatcher's mock funeral in the former pit village of Goldthorpe in April this year – an effigy was paraded through the town, before being burnt.

Stigmatisation and resistance

Such a mobilisation of most of the population of an area devastated by the destruction of industry, in a country over five

years into seemingly endless austerity, can surely be categorised as an act of political protest. The relative insecurity of their current jobs, the threat of further bouts of unemployment – forced onto a benefit regime now proudly *designed* to be insecure or unsustainable – is a condition now spreading across more areas of the UK, wider groups of the population.

Just as their Thatcherite predecessors, today's government appears determined to stigmatise the group variously labelled the 'undeserving poor', the 'entitlement culture' or the 'precariat'. Economic poverty is accompanied by palpably unjust ideological associations such as when Chancellor George Osborne seeks to imply that the 'welfare culture' itself created families like the Philpotts from Derby, whose unemployed parents were recently found guilty of killing their own children. Thatcher stirred up a racist moral panic with her speech about Britain being swamped by an alien culture – riots followed. The current Tory assault is explicitly on all of the poor whilst turning a not-so blind eye to corporate anti-social behaviour on an industrial scale. This corporate government could be accused of inviting further popular resistance. ■

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