

The idea that Britain is witnessing the rise of an 'underclass' of people at the bottom of the social heap, structurally separate and culturally distinct from the 'decent' working-class, has become increasingly popular over the past ten years. Some on the right claim to see the emergence of a new dangerous class made up of dysfunctional families who infect Britain's poor outer estates and inner-cities with quasi-criminal, anti-social, anti-work cultures of welfare dependency. According to Charles Murray (1994) this 'new rabble' now threatens the happy stability

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industrialisation has excluded a significant minority who now seem permanently surplus to economic requirements (Dahrendorf 1987). Others - such as Bagguley and Mann (1992) - are more sceptical, seeing underclass theory as the latest in a long tradition of bourgeois 'respectable fears' and 'moral panics' about society's poor and dispossessed: for them, these are just ideologies of the powerful peddled to mystify the real causes and problems of poverty.

Underclass terminology is difficult to avoid. For government ministers, for documentary makers and feature writers of the press - as well as for academics of different disciplines and political persuasions - the underclass idea can describe and explain much about the supposedly parlous moral health of fin-de-siècle society. And whereas in the US the 'underclass' has become a racial code-word, a sub-text to much British underclass commentary concerns the alleged degeneracy of the nation's youth. A host of social pathologies and problems - ranging from drug abuse and drunkenness to the breakdown of family and community values - have all been theorised in terms of this young underclass.

Echoing similar views from the Victorian period, the key figures in the landscape of modern, conservative accounts of the underclass are the irresponsible, welfare-draining, housing-queue jumping, young single mother and the feckless, work-shy, criminal, young man. Murray does not conceal his view of young men as 'essentially barbarians'. And in the rise of crime, unemployment and illegitimacy in Britain in the 1980s and '90s we can see, according to Mr Murray, the growth of a new underclass in which young people play a central role.

In more structural accounts there is also emphasis upon the youthfulness of the protagonists. Dahrendorf implies that it is the young who must be inculcated into the work ethic and extended social citizenship if they are not to be sucked into a dangerous,

disorderly underclass. Similarly, the policies developed by recent Conservative governments to tackle the underclass problem (which seem set to continue under the New Labour administration) have been ones targeted at young people. These are numerous but include, for instance, the promotion of workfare and 'citizenship' strategies to manage and control unemployed under-25s, and punitive policies towards young offenders and authoritarian restrictions on young people's cultures and social lives (such as night-time curfews and the outlawing of activities associated with the rave/dance culture).

In summary, the underclass debate is largely a debate about youth, even if some writers are less than explicit that their prime subjects (or suspects) are young people.

### The screaming silence

What have youth researchers had to say about these controversial but remarkably persistent, popular and influential ideas? The answer - despite youth sociology being perfectly placed to comment - is, sadly, rather little. One or two writers have found the underclass idea useful and one or two have argued it to be useless. Accounts of the way that youth have suffered the consequences of unemployment and unjust government policy have not been few in number and yet there has been, what Steve Craine (1997) calls, a 'screaming silence' in the place of a critical but open engagement with the idea that long-term economic exclusion maybe generating underclass-like sub-cultures amongst the young.

Westergaard observes that although underclass theory may be shown to be a 'powerful myth which social science has a responsibility to explode' it may also suggest new paradigms of productive insight, which social science has a responsibility to explore' (1992: 58 1). The chequered history and dubious political pedigree of underclass ideas do not disallow the fact that

# A new youth underclass?

**Robert MacDonald urges sociologists of youth culture to engage appropriately with the debate.**

of wider society.

Underclass theorists of the liberal-left tend to be more reticent about its cultural content but accept the likelihood of some sort of underclass coming into existence given prevailing social structural conditions. De-



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they may describe - partially - pressing social developments inadequately explained by the theories of the right.

Taking youth crime as an example, as Jock Young has pointed out, there is still a chronic tendency towards partiality with critics of underclass theory offering up images of youthful wrongdoers as the victims of economic circumstance or 'moral panics' as a counterpoint to right-wing imagery of young men as villains and barbarians. Neither picture tells the whole story, of course, but the recent failure of youth researchers to offer convincing alternative explorations of young people, the worlds they occupy in the late 1990s and their involvement (or otherwise) in the sorts of culture taken to be indicative of the rise of a new underclass has been partly responsible for the currency enjoyed by underclass theses.

### Researching youth and the 'underclass' in the future

I have recently edited a collection of papers by youth researchers who are committed to critical engagement with underclass ideas and which attempt to progress these sociological debates about youth exclusion (MacDonald, 1997). The volume analyses the restructuring of the labour market, housing, welfare, social care, criminal justice, and education and training institutions which took place during the 1980s and '90s and the consequences of these changes for disadvantaged groups of young men and women. The contributors document how paths of transition have become riskier for young people and more prone to lead to unemployment, homelessness, involvement in crime and serious social exclusion. In general, though, most contributors question the value of underclass perspectives.

The book also contains, however, an important caveat to its extensive conceptual and empirical critique of youth underclass theory: whilst evidence supporting underclass theories may well be slim, evidence offered up against them is also often not suitable to the task. Much of the research - from youth studies and elsewhere - which claims to dismiss underclass thinking is now outdated, or based upon questionnaire survey techniques with samples

constructed from censuses or other partial records (which are likely to omit or generate non-response from 'underclass' members), and/or has been undertaken in places and with groups where it would always be unlikely to uncover a youth underclass.

This is not to say that there is a youth underclass, let alone to suggest that Murray is right in his conceptualisation of it but, rather, that it is not as simple to dispense empirically with these ideas as most would like to hope.

If we are to properly engage with Murray's thesis what is needed are studies which are able to explore, in depth and over time, the values, activities and outlooks of people in places and during periods where underclass phenomena are most likely to show themselves. Only ethnographic, longitudinal studies of particular localities, down to neighbourhood level, and key social groups resident in them, are likely to provide the sort of evidence necessary to support or reject underclass theories (and to develop persuasive alternative theories of social exclusion). Through this sort of approach to debates about the underclass and social exclusion we might also see a welcome return to an invigorated sociology of youth culture in the late 1990s.

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# The same old generation game?

Phil Cohen examines contrasting notions of potency and powerlessness within youth culture

With New Labour, New Britain, we have truly entered the age of post modern politics. We have finally arrived at a politics in which modernity itself has become a designer label for marketing a brand of thinking that has no content other than the announcement of its own arrival. Ironically, the linking of 'the new' with the project of 'rejuvenating' state and civil society is nothing new. Disraeli's Young England movement had much the same rhetorical intent, even if the scope of its appeal was somewhat more restricted.

To equate the 'coming to power' of a political party with the 'coming of age' of a new generation is a powerful ideological device; it enables troublesome divisions of class, gender, and 'race' to be dissolved away in a single all embracing gesture of inclusion. And, after all, who would want to be identified with archaic institutions run by senile placemen, in a world that capitalism has made safe for the 'permanent revolution' of technologies and commodities in its global market place?

### Eternal youth

The idea that youth is a unitary, and hence unifying category has a history as long as that of modernity, and the two are closely linked. The invention of adolescence as a distinctive stage

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of the life cycle was part of the same discourse that challenged the 'dead hand of tradition' braking the 'engines of progress'. As a result young people have had to carry a peculiar burden of representation; everything they do, say, think, or feel, is scrutinised by an army of professional commentators for signs of the times. Over the last century the 'condition of youth question' has assumed increasing importance as being symptomatic of the health of the nation or the future of the race, the welfare of the family, or the state of civilisation as-we-know-it.

So youth has been invested with enormous symbolic power, but this potency has been largely confined to the more visible aspects of youthfulness to do with the adolescent body, and its emergent sexuality. In the post war period this 'body politics' has been wrapped up in a carapace of consumerism. The cultural industries have combined to manufacture youth as a set of life styles or 'looks' that can be bought and sold as easily as the clothes, records and the other accoutrements that define 'teenagery'. Because these fashions contain a built in principle of obsolescence, and can be perpetually recycled, youth is very good for business. In 'old' societies, dominated by the Great Fear of ageing, the search for 'eternal youth' has produced an apparently unquenchable desire to 'keep up with new times' amongst all age groups. In order to stake out their privileged claim on 'youth', young people have thus continually to improvise new ways of asserting their difference, from their elders, as well as their peers; this in turn both deconstructs youth as a unitary category and fuels the recycling of youth culture process

### Marginal youth

At the same time, in the economic and political spheres, youth has remained a prime site of marginality and powerlessness. Until very recently, most apprenticeships into workplace culture meant being confined to various kinds of skivvying, fetching and carrying jobs, and a youth wage that ensured you had to go on living at home. This was a despised, quasi feminine, position from which boys hoped to escape into fully fledged masculinity, either through entry into skilled manual trades and the prerogatives of a 'family wage' or via the rivalrous fraternities of street gang and pub culture; girls meanwhile remained largely

trapped in forms of work and community associated with their domestic role in the home, and apprenticed to early marriage.

For the middle classes, in contrast, studenthood provided a temporary moratorium from the pressures of earning a living and 'growing up'. Indeed it licensed a period of 'careering about' which despite its apparent frivolity prepared them for the kind of self possessed individualism needed for the successful pursuit of a career. One of the ways of looking at 'classic' working class youth culture and its 'resistance through ritual' is to see it as a largely frustrated attempt to improvise a version of the adolescent moratorium under conditions which did not allow for it.

### New identities

Today, of course, this picture has become much more complicated. Working class boys and girls are much less likely to grow up feeling that they have an occupational destiny 'in their bones'; their prides of place are more likely to be anchored to imagined kinships and communities entirely disconnected from divisions of labour in family or workplace. Transitions from school are now decisively routed through further education and vocational training, not through informal inter-generational cultures of apprenticeship and inheritance.

This does not mean that this whole template of identity disappears. Matrilocality and male territorialism continue to rule OK on many council estates the length and breadth of deindustrialized Britain; but these forms are no longer functional in the sense of equipping young people with the identities they need to make the transition into regimes of work. This could be put more strongly. The culture of masculinity and femininity associated with manual labourism continues to be reproduced within many working class families but actively disqualifies these young people from taking up the opportunities opened up by the advent of new information technologies and service industries in the post-Fordist economy. As a result they become locked into a position of chronic dependence on their own cultural resources, forced to make a living in the secondary labour market at the same time as they achieve both pariah and celebrity status in the mass media for their ability to go on living spectacularly at the margins.

### Potency and powerlessness

The contradiction between symbolic potency and real powerlessness - which I have suggested lies at the heart of the youth question - is found in an especially intense form within black youth cultures. The immense influence of African American vernaculars in the evolution of popular music, in street fashions and in styles of body language is an everyday fact of contemporary youth culture. But it has fed off and reinforced processes of racial exclusion to ensure that only a small minority of black youth succeed in making enough capital out of their own identity work to become part of the success story of the enterprise culture. Significant numbers of Asian youth, now equipped with their own distinctive diasporic identities have found it easier to move onwards and upwards, especially through routes into higher education and the culture of studenthood.

Turning 'exotic' forms of marginality into marketable life styles is all grist to the mill of today's multicultural capitalism; trading off cultural cross overs, fusions, ethnic diversities and hybridities of every kind is where the action is and where the profits are to be made. But this does little for the self esteem of young people locked into structural unemployment, the casual labour market and the hidden economy of drugs and petty crime.

### Extended adolescence

The enlargement of adolescence, its encroachment on childhood, and prolongation into what used to be adulthood is thus both culturally driven and required by the economic collapse of earlier strategies of generational replacement for all but the most privileged. For the disadvantaged, chronic prematurity in the realm of sexual 'body politics' has gone along with the retardation of skills required to stake out claims to public amenity and resource in wider and more civic terms. The figure of the skinhead, dressed in dungarees and bald as a new born baby, frozen in an aggressive macho stance, defending an obsolete white proletarian ethnicity is perhaps the most spectacular case in point. But there are many more young people unable, through no fault of their own, to make the transition to the



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kinds of mobile individualism demanded by the new career culture, who are no less stranded, and whose sense of frustration leads to less visible, if more self destructive patterns of response.

Adopting a moralistic stance towards this phenomenon does nothing to help understand or tackle it. Sweeping condemnations of 'yob culture' and 'lawless masculinities' may chime well with punitive strategies of zero tolerance policing and criminalisation. The rhetoric may go down well with Middle England. But these interventions are as useless as the sentimental victimologies they are designed to replace when it comes to dealing the underlying issues. The Blairite mantra of "education, education, education" will only work if it connects credible narratives of aspiration to the underlying contradictions of the youth question. That means taking concrete political and economic measures to enfranchise those groups of young people who are most marginalised so they are less dependent on the kinds of symbolic potency our society offers them as a consolation prize, and which they in turn have no option but to exploit. Only if that peculiar burden of representation is lifted from their shoulders, will they be free to grow up, and in turn do their bit to help lessen the tyranny of ageism, that same old generation game in which everyone loses out.

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