

The Myth of the Underclass

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An important part of the boss class's attacks on the mass of the population has been on the ideological level, hand in glove with privatisation, casualisation, unemployment, cuts in services, welfare and housing, and increasing authoritarianism and surveillance. So we were treated to claptrap about the "end of history", with the idea that now "communism" was dead, liberal democracy – read unfettered market capitalism – would rule triumphant with an end to class struggle. Another part of this ideological assault was to point to the conditions in the "under-developed" countries and in Eastern Europe to highlight how well off we were in the West and how grateful we should be.

Yet another part of the ideological assault was the appearance of the term "underclass" which is being used more and more in the media. The term first emerged in the United States in the early 70s where it was used by sociologists heavily influenced by the ideas of Weber to refer to a part of the population that was permanently in unemployment and poverty. There was a strong racial content in this analysis as the underclass was often identified by these sociologists (Glasgow, Tabb, Weis) with the urban ghettos, where many blacks and Hispanics live in unemployment or low-status, casual employment. Later Rex and Tomlinson in 1979 used the term to mean "a disadvantaged group which does not share the same experience of privileges as the white working class". They argued in their study of Handworth in Birmingham that it does not make sense to describe ethnic minorities as part of the working class in spite of their characteristic working class employment profile(!) In their view underclass did not necessarily imply unemployment, although they thought that ethnic minorities did have greater unemployment levels. They felt that the underclass was defined by racial discrimination, and their exclusion from "traditional working class organisations" like the Labour Party and the unions (eh? surely some mistake?) and that where there was employment it tended to be in low paid, casual jobs.

But it was the right-wing American sociologist Charles Murray who did most to popularise the term 'underclass'. In his *Losing Ground* published in 1984 he put forward the idea that in the States a growing underclass is a serious threat to society. He blamed this on the increasing number of people dependent on benefits. Welfare reforms introduced in the 60s, he argued, had led to an increasing number of black single parents and to many black youths losing interest in getting work. This underclass was responsible for a rising crime rate and the benefits paid to them were hitting taxpayers. In 1989 Murray imported these ideas to Britain. Writing in the *Sunday Times* he stated that Britain too had an underclass, although it was not composed mainly of ethnic minorities. He feels that 'underclass' does not refer to a level of poverty but to a type of poverty, in other words those that were untidy, work-shy and shiftless, often drunk and ill-schooled and ill-behaved. He felt that three 'phenomena' were danger signals for the development of an underclass-illegitimacy, violent crime and drop-out from the labour force. As one critic was to comment the British underclass to him were 'criminally violent bastards who refuse to work'. Of course, this type of irrational and emotive 'analysis' goes right back to the Victorian ideas of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Murray makes no effort to define the 'underclass' economically, everything is a cultural definition. His evidence for the existence of a British underclass is slight and sometimes contradictory. He blames the victims of poverty for their own predicament. This deep social analysis (not) was of course seized upon by those eager to attack the benefits system and on the lookout for scapegoats.

Vague

Another lousy specimen of what passes for thinkers in the ruling class, Rolf Dahrendorf, was to join his voice to this chorus. He thought that an underclass existed in both America and Britain with “undesirable” characteristics that included a “lifestyle of laid-back sloppiness, association in changing groups of gangs, congregation around discos or the like, hostility to middle class society, peculiar habits of dress, of hairstyle, often drugs or at least alcohol- a style in other words which has little in common with the values of the work society around.” Dahrendorf differed with Murray on the causes of this underclass, blaming it on the restructuring of capitalism, which now required fewer workers. He defined members of this underclass as immigrants and young people who have had no chance to become full members of society, the unemployed, the low-paid, as well as some of the elderly and ‘those who have suffered mishaps of one kind or another’. This vague definition fails to explain what all these groups have in common, apart from the fact that they lack ‘citizenship rights’ which are themselves not defined. His confusion is apparent in the original article on the underclass where he says ‘One may wonder whether the word class is as yet appropriate’. In a later article he says that ‘it is precisely not a class’.

Another sociologist, Anthony Giddens, was to assert a bit more strongly that the underclass was actually a class. He talked about a dual labour market, where jobs in the primary labour market were well paid, secure with some chance of career mobility, whilst jobs in the secondary labour market were badly-paid, with little security, and ‘dead end’. It is these secondary labour workers who make up the underclass. He argued that women and ethnic minorities were particularly likely to be found in this underclass. Unlike Dahrendorf and Murray, he thought that the underclass was radicalised by its experiences. It had a basic difference of interest with the working class who with good pay and secure jobs, felt little sympathy for radical change. But, as has been pointed out, there is no clear division between a primary and secondary labour market. Some jobs may be well-paid but lack security, whilst quite a few low-paid jobs have job security. Even those in (relatively) well-paid jobs are increasingly on part-time or short-term contracts. As for the unemployed, and even the long-term unemployed, many are from the employed working class and still have close connections with those still in jobs.

There was some dissent among sociologists about the whole idea of an underclass. Dean and Gooby-Taylor noted that ‘Underclass is a symbolic term with no single meaning, but a great many applications’. It has become a symbol of ‘socially constituted definitions of failure. In society in general it is used to scapegoat the poor and disadvantaged for the social problems of which they are the victims’.

The New Rabble

Once the concept of underclass and with it a suitable scapegoat was established, the boss class began to refer to it with greater frequency. It is now an essential ingredient in the moral panics that are regularly manufactured, not least in the ‘law and order’ moral panics. Murray himself has come to the fore in leading this ideological assault. Again writing in the Sunday Times in 1994 he gloated about how the term had come into common usage. He drooled over the fact that John Redwood, then Secretary of State for Wales had launched an attack on single parents, whilst the BBC’s Breakfast News had carried an ‘unsympathetic portrait of single mothers’.

Murray defends the 'traditional monogamous marriage' and regards the Bible as one of the foundation texts for morality. He says: 'The Britain in which the family has effectively collapsed does not consist of blacks or inner-city neighbourhoods, but of lower working-class neighbourhoods everywhere'. He predicts that the 'upper middle class' will return to Victorian values (what he calls the new Victorianism)- and that 'large sections of what used to be the British working class' will degenerate into what he calls the New Rabble. To bolster the traditional family under threat, he advocates the abolition of benefits for single women.

Peter Lilley, Secretary of State for Social Security, saluted this reactionary crap. Soon papers were full of vicious attacks on the poor, on single parents, on what used to be called the 'dangerous classes' in Victorian Britain. Indeed Murray had just written a book with Richard Herrnstein, another extreme right and racist sociologist, called *The Bell Curve* (Fortunately in the meantime Herrnstein has dropped dead). In it they advance the idea that low IQ plays a significant role in chronic unemployment, single motherhood, welfare dependency and crime. Some of the pseudo facts they come up with are that the average IQ of mothers of illegitimate children is 88, of 'chronic welfare recipients' 85, of 'recidivist criminals' 80, and of long term unemployed 77. Collectively these groups constitute the underclass. Here are some of the choice items that pass for thought and analysis in the book. "Going on welfare really is a dumb idea, and that is why women who are low in cognitive ability end up there". "The people who are left behind are likely to be disproportionately those who suffer not only bad luck but also a lack of energy, thrift, farsightedness, determination-and brains".

Trash

Murray refers to poor whites throughout as 'white trash', whilst he and Herrnstein cite the work of racist eugenicists like Arthur Jensen who claimed that blacks were genetically intellectually inferior to whites. The two authors carried out no original research for the book, their most frequently used references being from the *Mankind Quarterly*, founded by Robert Gayre, a supporter of apartheid in South Africa and of white supremacy in Rhodesia, and who has said in public that blacks are 'worthless'. A whole nest of extreme right "intellectuals" gathered around this rag, including Ottmar von Verschner, who taught the Nazi Doctor Mengele, and Corrado Gini, prominent in the eugenics movement in Fascist Italy. The editor of MQ, Roger Pearson, was booted out of the rabid World Anti-Communist League because he was too right wing! The writer cited most frequently in *The Bell Curve* is Richard Lynn, an associate editor of MQ who claimed that the Holocaust may have improved the Jewish gene pool by killing those not intelligent enough to get away in time! Another pseudo-scientist cited by the dynamic duo is J. Philippe Rushton who has stated that blacks are genetically disposed to 'sexual excess' summed up in the statement: "It's a trade-off: more brain or more penis".

But none of this is surprising considering Murray's past. As a youth in Newton, Iowa, he engineered a burning of a massive cross which terrified the only 2 black families in town. He served as a counter-insurgency expert in Thailand during the Vietnam War. So it's quite easy for him to come out with the following statements: "The most efficient way to raise the IQ of a society is for smarter women to have higher birth rates than duller women...The United States already has policies that inadvertently social-engineer who has babies, and it is encouraging the wrong women".

Murray's ideas were taken up enthusiastically in Britain by their counterparts. One Professor of Psychology at the University of Ulster writing in the Times ranted that 'with an average IQ of 77, the chronic unemployed are not much above the level of mental retardation and many of them are below this level. The brutal truth is that many of the chronic unemployed are mentally incapable of learning the skills increasingly required in advanced industrial economies'. He then went on to repeat the shit about the average IQ of blacks being " 15 points below that of whites, and 16 per cent of blacks have an IQ of below 70, and are mentally retarded". Another lecturer in psychology at Edinburgh University, Chris Brand, brought out a book *The G Factor* which also made this claim and urged low IQ single mothers to "breed" with intelligent men to escape the poverty trap (the book was later withdrawn by the publishers).

The last 2 years have seen a succession of attacks on the so-called underclass-Jack Straw's famous speech on aggressive beggars and squeegee merchants and his calls for curfews for children, the theatre director Trevor Nunn castigating the homeless living in doorways in the West End, and the right wing journalist Bruce Anderson writing in the *Spectator* in July 1996. The latter frothed at the mouth about : " expensively constructed slums full of layabouts and sluts whose progeny are two-legged beasts...we cannot cure this by family, religion and self-help. So we will have to rely on repression".

None of this chorus of hatred is accidental. It is all very much part of a campaign to justify attacks on welfare benefits, and on alternative lifestyles and relationships that fall outside the desired model of the nuclear family, to justify increased surveillance, repression and police powers, and the building of more prisons, proposals for new detention centres and threats of workfare. The myth of the underclass itself is used to undermine unity within the working class itself, as its less well-paid and unemployed sections are divided off from those who may have better wages and job security. Indeed, the idea of an underclass has sometimes emerged in the pages of the anarchist/libertarian press. This is indicative of the strength of the campaign. It is an idea that must be fought. There is no underclass- even if it is argued that it is a revolutionary class. There is one class-the working class. Even if at this moment there are real differences within it, in terms of status, sex, and race, real differences that should not be denied or avoided, the goal of revolutionaries must be to develop class unity and class consciousness. The dangerous myth of the underclass is being used in the States, France and Germany against the less well-off sections of the working class, where they are often ethnic minorities and/or recent immigrants. This will lead to further growth in racism and the growth of far right parties. In Britain the myth of the underclass appears to be directed against a much wider section of the working class, whether black or white.

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