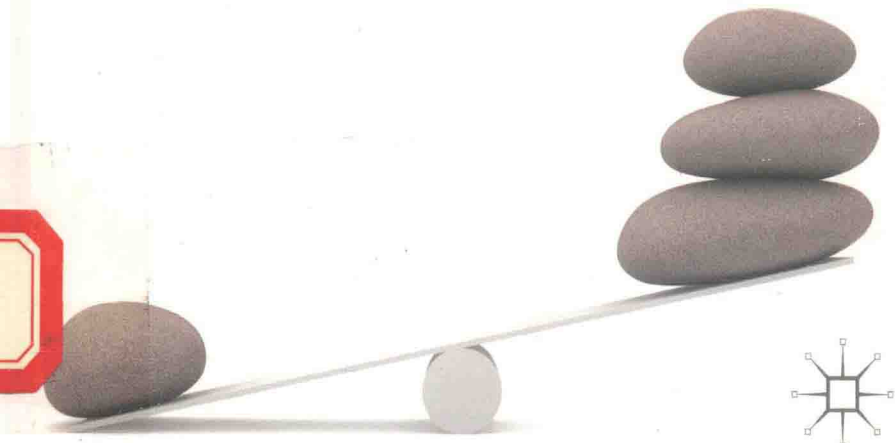
CLASS INEQUALITY IN AUSTERITY BRITAIN

POWER, DIFFERENCE AND SUFFERING

Edited by **WILL ATKINSON, STEVEN ROBERTS, MIKE SAVAGE**



Class Inequality in Austerity Britain

Power, Difference and Suffering

Edited by

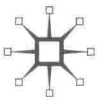
Will Atkinson
University of Bristol, UK

Steven Roberts
University of Kent, UK

and

Mike Savage
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

palgrave
macmillan



First published 2012 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries

ISBN 978-1-137-01637-9

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne

List of Contributors

Will Atkinson is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol.

Harriet Bradley is Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Senior Research Fellow in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol.

Matt Clement is Associate Lecturer in the Department of Health and Applied Social Science at the University of the West of England.

Sarah Evans is Engagement Manager for the Social Sciences at the British Library.

Val Gillies is Research Professor within the Weeks Centre for Social and Policy Research and the Families & Social Capital Research Group at London South Bank University.

Nicola Ingram is a Research Assistant in the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol.

Lisa McKenzie is a Leverhulme Research Fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Nottingham.

Diane Reay is Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge.

Steven Roberts is Lecturer in Social Policy and Sociology at the University of Kent.

Mike Savage is Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics and Political Science, Visiting Professor at the Universities of Bergen and York and Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Manchester.

Andrew Sayer is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lancaster.

Contents

List of Figures and Tables vii

List of Contributors viii

1 Introduction: A Critical Sociology of the Age of Austerity 1
Will Atkinson, Steven Roberts and Mike Savage

2 Economic Crisis and Classed Everyday Life: Hysteresis, Positional Suffering and Symbolic Violence 13
Will Atkinson

3 'We never get a fair chance': Working-Class Experiences of Education in the Twenty-First Century 33
Diane Reay

4 Banking on the Future: Choices, Aspirations and Economic Hardship in Working-Class Student Experience 51
Harriet Bradley and Nicola Ingram

5 'Aspirations' and Imagined Futures: The Im/possibilities for Britain's Young Working Class 70
Steven Roberts and Sarah Evans

6 Personalising Poverty: Parental Determinism and the Big Society Agenda 90
Val Gillies

7 The Urban Outcasts of the British City 111
Matt Clement

8 The Stigmatised and De-valued Working Class: The State of a Council Estate 128
Lisa McKenzie

9 Broken Communities? 145
Mike Savage

10 Facing the Challenge of the Return of the Rich 163
Andrew Sayer

11 Conclusion: Three Challenges to the Exportation of Sociological Knowledge 180
Will Atkinson, Steven Roberts and Mike Savage

Select Bibliography 188

Index 193

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

2.1 Weekly expenditure by class, 2009–10 (£) 15
2.2 Proportion of average weekly spend by class, 2009–10 15

Tables

2.1 Proportion of weekly expenditure by class (%) 16
4.1 Passages to university: Motivations and pathways 56
10.1 Top rates of taxation in selected countries 1980–2004 (%) 166

1

Introduction: A Critical Sociology of the Age of Austerity

Will Atkinson, Steven Roberts and Mike Savage

The last 15 years or so have witnessed an extraordinary revitalisation of sociological research on social class in Britain. For some time in the doldrums, under attack from within and without academia, it is now back high on the agenda thanks in large part to a progressive deepening of the theoretical scope of its core concept to grasp themes generally excluded from previous programmes of research. Class is not just about exploitation and economic inequalities, it is now established, but cultural and symbolic domination too; it is not just about life chances and 'equality of opportunity', but about self-worth, suffering and denigration as well; and it is tied not only to a politics of redistribution, as crucial as that is, but also, at the same time, a politics of *recognition*. In pursuing these themes the key source of inspiration for researchers has not been Karl Marx or Max Weber, the opposing couple at the heart of the sociology of class through most of the twentieth century, but the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu.[1] For this Frenchman, social class is defined not by relation to the means of production, nor by possession of particular skills and capacities in the labour market, but by the possession of all forms of economic capital (wealth and income), cultural capital (education and 'good taste') and social capital (contacts, networks, names, club membership, etc.) which together shape the kinds of experience it is possible to have, the kinds of goods and opportunities it is possible to attain and the kinds of people one is likely to have regular contact with, and, in turn, the expectations, values, desires, tastes and lifestyles developed in adaptation. Far from all being bestowed with equal value, however, those possessing the most resources, and the most power, impose their own way of life – educational or economic accomplishment, being 'cultivated', 'well-mannered', self-interested and so on – as the legitimate, worthy and

ultimately *right* way to do things, denigrating those not possessing the material conditions necessary for their achievement. This process Bourdieu famously dubbed 'symbolic violence'.

For all its advances, however, this new direction in class analysis has been accused by some hanging on to older frameworks, less taken by Bourdieu's ideas, of unjustifiably sidelining – not simply through choice of research object but in theoretical principle – economic inequalities, differences in life chances, the machinations of the business and political elite and the convulsions of capitalism.[2] It may well be supposed, therefore, that it is essentially powerless to understand or effectively critique the causes and consequences of not only the severe economic downturn of the late 2000s and the pervasive political climate of austerity that has followed in the UK but the larger global neoliberal movement from which they both spring. This volume aims to resolutely refute this claim and make the case that frameworks inspired to greater and lesser degrees by Bourdieu – including those developed by Loic Wacquant and Beverley Skeggs – not only *can* grasp and censure the current political-economic juncture but *must*. They *can* because differences in economic capital and power have always been fundamental to Bourdieu's conceptualisation of conditions of life, the formation of tastes and lifestyles, likely trajectories through the class structure and possibilities of action, as have the forces of the capitalist economic field in producing them, it is just that they remain inextricably entwined with the fundamental human quest for recognition and, with that, symbolic power. Consider, for example, the fact that – contrary to Bourdieu's critics who chastise him for presuming 'high culture' is necessarily the legitimated form of culture – symbolic domination is always a question of the precise balance of power between the dominant (economic) and dominated (cultural) fraction of the dominant class. In twenty-first century Britain, could it be that the economic fraction – comprised not only of business owners but of a fusion of higher managers and top-level professional too[3] – has succeeded in asserting its dominance more than ever and thus further (though not entirely) imposed its hedonistic, materialistic lifestyle as the legitimate one, a move which yields a *double victory* insofar as they attain greater symbolic recognition at the same time as efforts by others to approximate them by purchasing the goods and services they produce or administer return evermore economic capital to them (profits, bonuses, shares)? Moreover, a Bourdieusian strand of research dedicated to mapping the structure and practices of the 'elite' – or the 'field of power' containing individuals from the economic field *as well* as from the intellectual field,

political field and so on, all contending to impose their definition of the world, and the policies necessary to achieve it, as legitimate – is beginning to flourish.[4]

They *must*, on the other hand, because sociology is, as Norbert Elias[5] claimed, a *myth buster*, tearing down prevailing misconceptions and folk beliefs, not least, as Bourdieu[6] added, the myths wielded by the dominant and perpetuating the reproduction of inequality. Sociology is thus a means of *defence against symbolic domination* (which, among other things, sustains *material domination*) and the current tropes mobilised by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government of 'fairness' and compulsory austerity, as extensions of neoliberal orthodoxy, should be no exception. The ideas underpinning government rhetoric must, therefore, be scrutinised, the real effects of the 2008 recession and coalition policy must be demonstrated through rigorous empirical research and the true winners of the current political-economic moment must be unmasked. In short, Marxism, for all its insights, does not have a monopoly on the study of the economic dimension of class, nor does it, as Erik Olin Wright[7] seems to imply in his categorisation of versions of class analysis, possess a monopoly on critique of the current order in the service of bringing a better tomorrow.

In this volume, then, we have brought together a range of rigorous yet engaged interventions, in the form of original research pieces or critical overviews of policy or evidence, from scholars united by their guiding interest in exposing the operations of class domination with reference to Bourdieusian themes yet covering a wide assortment of specialist areas. Broad concerns with the economic and symbolic violence inflicted on and through education, family life and community in the present and recent past weave through more or less every chapter, but the precise themes explored include the stratified impact of the late 2000s recession and austerity on family life and consumption (Atkinson), the deleterious effects of schools policy and cuts (Reay), the likely impact of the hike in higher education tuition fees given the disadvantages already suffered by working-class university students (Bradley and Ingram), the barriers to and denigration of working-class aspirations (Roberts and Evans), the myopic construction of parenting policy (Gillies), the economic and symbolic marginalisation of the most deprived sections of the working class and its role in the genesis of proscribed activity and the summer riots of 2011 (Clement, McKenzie) and the ignorance and hypocrisy of claims that communities in the UK are 'broken' (Savage), with Andrew Sayer offering an analysis of the rise of the new rentier class as a salutary reminder not to

take our sociological gaze off those at the top in examining the suffering of those at the bottom. Ultimately, by pooling our expertise and acting as something more like the 'collective intellectual' of which Bourdieu spoke, we hope to offer a more thoroughgoing and comprehensive assessment and, with that, more effective critique of the bearing of current political practice on both conditions of existence and ways of seeing the world. This is robust scholarship, in other words, but in service of the commitment to contributing to political and popular debate to the best of our abilities.[8]

In the rest of this introductory chapter we want to sketch out the socio-historical context for the contributions and, in doing so, follow through on our claim that a Bourdieusian sociology of class possesses the means to make sense of not only the consequences of the current nexus of relations of domination but its genesis too. Specifically, and though constraints of space mean the overview will be suggestive rather than exhaustive, the hope being that it might spur further analysis, we seek to embed the economic crisis and its political fallout within an account of the rise and persistence in Britain of neoliberalism, not as simply an economic model easily imposed by a capitalist elite to serve their interests, as for Marxism, nor – for all its useful insights on the diffusion and reworking of neoliberal categories of thought in multiple contexts – as the overly fluid and decentralised cluster of 'techniques' examined by advocates of governmentality.[9] Instead, the birth of the neoliberal creed and its various articulations, it will be shown, are anchored in the complex struggles and strategies (in Bourdieu's sense) within and across a specific cluster of *fields* diffusing their effects into everyday life via multitudinous circuits of symbolic power.

The neoliberal revolution

On the 11th of May 2010, David Cameron, leader of the Conservative Party since 2005, was invited by Queen Elizabeth II to form a new government, ending thereby 13 years of New Labour power. Within weeks an 'emergency budget' was put together seeking, it was said, to rein in the excessive spending recklessly pursued by Gordon Brown's short-lived administration, slash the bloated budget deficit and steadily navigate the choppy tides whipped up by worldwide recession. At the same time, however, this new government, incorporating an electorally-battered Liberal Democrat Party, sought to couple the new atmosphere of austerity with a determined rhetoric of *fairness*. Indeed, the official 'coalition agreement' penned by a small cabal of like-minded leading

lights of both parties has the word boldly emblazoned on its third page in large type alongside 'freedom' and 'responsibility', presenting it as a cornerstone of joint governance, and is crammed with warm words to the effect that the Prime Minister and his Deputy, Nick Clegg, will 'ensure fairness is at the heart of those decisions' on how to cut spending 'so that those most in need are protected' and 'everyone, regardless of background, has the chance to rise as high as their talents and ambition allow them'.[10] Despite this rhetoric, however, in the emergency budget and beyond the coalition have scrapped or whittled down those existing programmes which, however meagre and superficial, were aimed at reducing economic and educational inequalities, such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance – the payment to pupils entering post-compulsory schooling as a means of lessening the demands of economic necessity – and the Future Jobs Fund – the programme of subsidised youth employment. Notable too that, as new means of raising revenue, they have pushed up tax on consumption (VAT) rather than tax on income, which is known to hit those earning less disproportionately, allowed universities to triple tuition fees and sought to 'reform' the welfare system by reducing payments and imposing tougher criteria for receipt. Who exactly this is supposed to be 'fair' for is far from clear.

The shift from prosperity to austerity, however, and from New Labour to the coalition government, whilst offering so many ruptures and transformations in political practice to everyday perception, are in fact relatively small, though not insignificant, details in a much longer-running articulation of state, economy and society sustaining and deepening domination – an articulation best grasped in terms of the ascent of *neoliberalism*, the economic-cum-political doctrine extolling the virtues of unfettered market forces and rapid state shrinkage. Before the 1970s it was confined, albeit obstreperously, to a marginal corner of the field of academic and political economics, overshadowed in all respects by Keynesianism, the economic model advocating active state regulation of markets and a robust public sector in the pursuit of growth and prosperity, but by the end of the decade a dramatic revolution in a multitude of national economic and political fields – those of the UK being first among them – had installed it as the orienting principle of statecraft and set the course for global diffusion. Fundamental to this upheaval, of course, was the shattering anomie in political-economics induced by mounting unemployment and surging inflation (together known as 'stagflation') in the early seventies. The products of a steady intensification of global economic transactions undermining

assumptions born decades earlier – brought to a head with the collapse of the consensual system of international exchange controls (the Bretton Woods agreement) and the subsequent Arab oil embargo of 1973 following pro-Israeli US intervention in the Yom Kippur war – from a Keynesian point of view it was believed that these two phenomena simply could not occur together and required completely contradictory solutions (i.e. government spending *and* saving).

Yet neoliberalism eventually succeeded in this climate not thanks to simple rational progress – after all, a whole batch of 'neo-Keynesians' were desperately trying to rework the master's model in order to conserve their position – but, instead, as a consequence of three interlinked strategies of subversion tenaciously pursued by its proponents to counter their domination in the field of economics.[11] First of all, they pushed a progressive *mathematicisation*, soon succeeding, through relentless one-upmanship against econometricians, in imposing statistical prowess as a novel criterion of intellectual credibility within the field with which to discredit the 'gentleman scholars' of Keynesianism. Secondly, academic advocates of neoliberal thought ardently engaged in *vulgarisation*, that is to say, the persistent courting of the sympathetic sectors of the media and political fields, manifest in the endless editorials, newspaper columns, debates and meetings, which forced them to hone their capacities in ideological debate and package their credo in 'common sense' ways. Thirdly, and most importantly, there was the drive toward *internationalisation*, or the constant determination to overcome marginalisation within one national context by fostering homologies in manifold nations across the globe through specific networks of individuals (e.g. the Mont Pelerin Society, the Chilean 'Chicago Boys') and the founding of think-tanks such as, in the UK, the Institute of Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies and the Adam Smith Institute.

Indeed, it was from these quasi-academic bases that the advocates of neoliberalism endeavoured to impose their construction of the world on the British political field, particularly through the Conservative Party. However, the latter being itself a fractious system of difference and division, while neoliberal economists certainly appealed to the interests of and thus forged concrete links with particular members (e.g. future kingmaker Keith Joseph), the dominant fraction led by Ted Heath, Prime Minister in the early seventies, generally upheld the rapidly crumbling Keynesian orthodoxy. Only with his electoral defeat in 1974, and the inflation and unemployment of the later seventies following the crises already mentioned, did the moment come for the

UK's neoliberal revolution. In fact it entered the political field, in a pincer movement, from two directions: on the one hand, via the budgetary constraints imposed on a reluctant Labour government by the International Monetary Fund (by this time hijacked and steered by neoliberal principles) as a condition of assistance with the financial chaos of the seventies, and on the other hand, and in the long run more consequentially, through the upheavals within the Conservative party in opposition wherein the perceptual schemes of the future Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, were fashioned and eventually triumphant. The latter is no simple tale of a single charismatic visionary, nor is it the typical Marxist story of captains of industry 'capturing' political parties in a bid to restore flagging power;[12] it is, rather, a question of complex and shifting struggles, homologies, alliances and networks of interest and influence forged and sustained between multiple individuals (Samuel Britten, Gordon Pepper, Keith Joseph, etc.) situated in multiple fields within the field of power (the think-tanks, the City, the media, the bureaucratic field etc.), some of whom shifted between or stood within more than one field at a time. Nevertheless, none of that would have had the effect it did had it not synchronised with the provincial, petit-bourgeois individualism and anti-'establishment' views of a woman born of a Grantham shopkeeper who, not without serious struggles and strategising within her own party, came to dominate the Conservatives and, through the presentation of herself and her categories of thought as on the side of 'the people', distributed an image and idiom appealing in different ways to political dispositions across the class structure.[13]

The eventual effects of the nascent neoliberal state were threefold. First of all, the economic policies of the Conservative government through the 1980s bore severe and long-lasting *material* and *structural* consequences. In the cause of unleashing market competitiveness and exhorting individuals to work, income tax was cut, the notoriously regressive value added tax was pushed up, wage councils were abolished and the value of welfare benefits dropped relative to earnings,[14] while relentless deindustrialisation, privatisation and flexibilisation of the labour market in the name of 'efficiency' mixed with eager nurturance of financial services quickly delivered devastating levels of unemployment and insecure, precarious labour to the workforce but ever higher returns to the elite within the economic universe. Soon enough a gigantic chasm between the apex and the nadir of the class structure stretched open with disturbing speed and ferocity,[15] with those at the bottom turning to illicit activity and violence as a means

of attaining some form of recognition being swept up in the expanding penal wing of the state.[16] This was accompanied, secondly, by intense *symbolic* work aimed at discrediting and vanquishing the category of 'class' once and for all and replacing it with alternative tropes conforming to, and perpetuating, the neoliberal worldview. This battle was waged on several fronts: in the explicit rejection of the category as a politically malignant fiction ('class is a communist concept', said Thatcher), in the invention of new categories to distinguish the poorest (the 'underclass') from everyone else ('taxpayers'), in the moral discourse fostering the image of agents as free-choosing responsible individuals unfettered by fantastical societal forces, but also, critically, in the demolition of trade union power through incessant regulation and restriction, thus relegating to the side lines of the symbolic struggle the chief exponents of the construction of 'the working class' as a unified group with a legitimate political purpose. Finally, Thatcherism succeeded in leaving its enduring residue in the political field, such that when the eponym fell out of favour, the 'common sense' ways of viewing and governing the world – the doxa – it had established remained more or less unchallenged. Witness the steady transformation of the Labour Party, first under Neil Kinnock and John Smith and then most radically under Tony Blair – an individual whose position and trajectory in the class structure and the space of political position-takings aligned him with Conservatives rather than progressives – from democratic socialist party to bastion of unconstrained neoliberalism. Rather than try to challenge the damaging doxic categories and manipulations of conditions of existence pushed on individuals as legitimate, they aped them instead, albeit eventually contained within the superficial discursive shell of a 'third way', in a strategy to gain electoral support.[17]

Thus, when 'New' Labour finally came to office in 1997, accompanied by the strategic language of rupture and renewal – a 'new dawn' no less – the material, symbolic and political landscapes changed very little. Economic growth was, as under Thatcher, valued over economic equality, and so while the (low) minimum wage and (workfare) measures to reduce poverty unquestionably had some effect on conditions of existence, the reluctance to redistribute wealth from the top down on the grounds that 'talented individuals' would then seek reward elsewhere in the global labour market, plus the so-called 'light touch' approach to regulation of the financial sector aimed at attracting those pursuing economic reward, ensured that the rates of inequality, and so the dispersion of the class structure, continued to be as stark as under Thatcher.[18] Moreover, New Labour took over, but revamped, the

construction of the social world as divided into two camps – the problematic 'socially excluded' versus the rest – and, though the bare individualism of the Conservatives was replaced by a vague and ineffectual focus on 'communities', the language of 'class', on which the party was founded, was thoroughly expunged from the legitimate lexicon.[19] Not only that, but the 'included' bulk of the populace were, in policy and practice, increasingly conceived as 'customers' and 'clients', and indeed a consumerist mentality, in which the legitimate route to recognition is via ownership and display of exclusive goods and practices, was diffused more widely.[20] One consequence of this, of course, was an increased desire for *credit*, and the deregulated and globally interlinked banks were quick to exploit this by handing out lucrative loans and mortgages to those lacking the capital to pay them back. Indeed, in the US, where economic and political struggles and strategies bore remarkable parallels (and indeed synergies) with those of the UK – staunchly conservative 1980s, the later nineties dominated by a right-wing social democrat claiming a bogus 'third way', neoliberalism and consumerism run rife as a result – the upshot was, of course, the subprime mortgage bubble and its catastrophic eruption, the fallout from which reached deep into the UK banking sector and generated worldwide recession.

New discourse, old ideas

Like the economic crisis of the seventies, the global financial meltdown of the late 2000s threw into question the doxic categories of political-economic thought that had produced it.[21] Neoliberalism and its core tenets were forced out into the open and scrutinised, up to a point, whilst progressive and Keynesian opponents became more numerous and strident in their calls for overthrow. Ironically, however, in the UK the Labour Party, widely (and rightly) held at least partially responsible for providing the conditions of possibility of the nation's experience of the economic crisis, was subsequently replaced in government by a party that had, at the time of New Labour's disastrous programme of deregulation, pushed for them to go even further. Yet the Conservative Party had, in the meantime, been undergoing its own mutations. After battling unsuccessfully against Tony Blair's encroachment on their political turf by lurching further toward the right in the early 2000s, an apparent *emulation strategy* was launched instead in which, essentially, the party was presented by the leading faction as 'modernised', socially liberal, 'fair' and, ultimately, in agreement with Labour on many policies (City Academies, gay rights, etc.). The presentation of a

closing down of political difference through mimicry, in other words, was now being pushed in from the right, and reached its apogee when David Cameron joined forces with the Liberal Democrats – themselves led by the so-called 'Orange Book' faction supportive of neoliberal measures – to present their coalition as 'liberal conservatism' in action. However, unlike the steady rightwards shift of the Labour Party a political generation earlier, all the signs indicate that this emulation is, in reality, better described as *dissimulation*.

Take, for example, the flagship discourse of the 'Big Society' which promotes volunteering, social enterprise and charity as the ideal vehicles for fostering the community cohesion and solidarity apparently absent in deprived areas yet key to solving their ills. Seemingly breaking with the individualism of Margaret Thatcher in which there was 'no such thing as society', in reality this is nothing but a giant Trojan horse for precisely the kind of individualism Britain's first female Prime Minister espoused – that is, it is not for the state to provide support, care or education for people; it is up to individuals themselves to look after their own interests, their family's interests, and (if they are so inclined) their neighbours' interests by founding and running their own programmes, whether a 'Free School' or community group.[22] Similarly, though members of the Conservative Party (especially Iain Duncan Smith) have endeavoured to appropriate tropes of 'fairness' and 'compassion' and project an earnest desire to reduce poverty, especially through bestowing such deeply ironic names on their think-tanks as 'The Centre for Social Justice', this is merely a thin recasting of the same old obsession with 'family breakdown', immorality and self-responsibility that marked the underclass debates of the early nineties without the slightest interest in referring to the established sociological causes of poverty and, for that matter, family hardship. Finally, under the banner of 'austerity' the Conservative-led government has essentially declared a 'state of exception', in Giorgio Agamben's[23] words, using the discourse as an excuse to engineer a fundamental restructuring of the public sector in which as much as possible is opened up and sold off to the players, and the fundamental interests, of the economic field. Indeed, as they themselves gleefully admit, the coalition has moved 'faster and further' toward the right-wing paradise of privatisation and self-responsibilisation in a few short years than Thatcher managed in a torturous decade.[24] This time, moreover, it would seem to be oriented less by petit-bourgeois individualism and moral authoritarianism than the worldview of the dominant class – as both the Prime Minister and his Chancellor are millionaire progeny of masters of the economy who successfully con-