

DANGEROUS CLASSES

**The underclass and
social citizenship**

LYDIA MORRIS



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Lydia Morris



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Dangerous Classes

This book provides an authoritative and much needed critical review of British and American debates about the underclass, set in the context of both historical equivalents and policy issues. The idea of an underclass is based on a notion of social exclusion, be it cultural or structural in nature. It strikes a contrast with the idea of social citizenship, a condition notionally guaranteed by welfare rights. In accepted definitions of the underclass, state dependence has come to be seen as a badge of exclusion rather than a guarantee of inclusion. There has been a gradual shift of emphasis in recent commentary from concern with social rights to anxiety about social obligations, often relating to the enforcement of the work ethic. Implicit in much of the literature is an inconclusive examination of gender roles, and particularly the failure of single mothers to fulfil their social duties. The ambiguities and contradictions of this position are uncovered. So too is the neglected issue of migrant labour and its use as a source of labour on terms not acceptable to the native population. The implications of this phenomenon for questions of social inclusion and the definition of the underclass are then considered in the wider context of the social construction of the labour market.

The book has emerged from the author's longstanding interest and research in unemployment, labour market change, gender relations and social policy. It will be of interest to students and researchers in all of these fields.

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Many thanks to Irving Velody who gave me the title
with all its ambiguity

Contents

Introduction	1
1 Dangerous classes	10
2 The mischievous ambiguity	33
3 The 'New' World	56
4 The concept of the underclass	80
5 Gender and the underclass	111
6 Migrant labour and the underclass	136
Conclusion	157
References	166
Index	176

Introduction

In the course of the 1980s, both Britain and America have seen two taken-for-granted features of social life come under challenge. The social organisation of both countries has been built around full time paid employment in a capitalist system of production, with a specific role for the nuclear family household through the daily and generational reproduction of the workforce. This arrangement is predicated upon a gendered division of labour in which the man is the principal earner and the woman has the main responsibility for domestic life, and it has not, so far, been fundamentally altered by the entry of a majority of married women into the labour force (Morris, 1990). The last decade has, however, seen high and enduring levels of male unemployment as well as an increase in the proportion of single mother households. Whether these two phenomena are related is not entirely clear, but in combination they certainly give cause to doubt the stability of key social institutions.

Two types of problem emerge for the sociologist. The first concerns explanation and interpretation: why have the changes come about and what will they mean for the future organisation of society? The second concerns the models which sociologists have constructed for understanding the social world: are they themselves time-bound and inadequate to accommodate change? One response which has promised to deal with both problems has been the creation of a residual category which falls outside of the social structure as it is conventionally understood; the 'underclass'. This concept does more than provide a social category which might contain, if not resolve, the analytical problem, for it has acquired a sense both pejorative and threatening. In much of its usage, those to whom the label is applied not only stand outside of

mainstream society and its central institutions, they reject its underlying norms and values.

In Victorian England these social outsiders were sometimes termed the dangerous classes. They are now doubly dangerous, posing not only a threat to social organisation, but also a challenge to our models for portraying and understanding social structure. Through the construction of a category of 'outsiders', this threat is located outside of society, which may then be perceived as internally cohesive and free from significant challenge. Such a view of the social structure is by no means new, and in the nineteenth century suspicion and condemnation of the redundant population, the lumpenproletariat, the street folk, the social outcasts, the residuum, and the dangerous classes was common. Chapter 1 reviews these images, also examining the sorts of explanations offered in the accounts of the time. The emphasis was on moral failure, and sometimes poor socialisation, but often with the implicit suggestion of a different breed of person. By the end of the century a much more explicitly genetic approach had developed, championed by the eugenics movement, and taken up by the Fabians as a basis for social engineering.

There has always been a problem of classification in treatments of this social residuum; that of distinguishing between the worthy and unworthy poor. Much of the early British provision for the poor was built around this division. By the twentieth century, especially after the war effort and the consequent diminution of the 'social problem group', there was great optimism about the expected achievements of the welfare state. The ambitions of the social policy of the time are summed up in Marshall's (1950) notion of 'social citizenship': the guarantee of full social inclusion for all. The concept of social citizenship stands then as a counterpart to that of the underclass; the promise of social inclusion, as opposed to moral and material exclusion.

Chapter 2 traces the development of the British welfare state, and the centrality of the worthy/unworthy distinction. This distinction is inevitable in policy which seeks to make provision for the poor, but also to maintain the work ethic, a tension clearly present in contemporary systems of social security. At the time of the Beveridge plan it must have seemed that guaranteed social citizenship was a feasible objective, but its implementation quickly ran into a number of difficulties. Firstly, there was the distinction between means tested and contributory benefit; only the latter was

granted unconditionally, while the former required an invasion of privacy and carried a greater social stigma. Secondly, there was the question of the rate of benefit which would ensure social inclusion, but without undermining the incentive to work. In practice, the guarantee of social citizenship carries with it the requirement of being willing and available for employment, and the policing of social security to this end has contributed to the stigma attaching to claimants. What was intended as a guarantee of inclusion has turned into a badge of exclusion.

The continuing presence of a marginalised or excluded group, currently termed the underclass, has been construed as a challenge to the achievement and objectives of the welfare state. On the one hand provision may be seen to have failed in its objective of guaranteed social inclusion for all, on the other hand the welfare state may be argued to have gone too far, to have proffered too many rights and extracted too few obligations. It is thus argued to have created a culture of dependency in a population which explicitly denies the norms and values of the society to which they notionally belong. These ideas have been most fully developed and argued in the US, and Chapter 3 examines the construction of the American welfare state, highlighting contrasts with Britain. Although the British approach initially served as a model in America, the system which eventually emerged in the mid-twentieth century showed some fundamental differences. The one which most concerns us here is the failure to provide long term provision for unemployed men as of right, and the reliance instead upon Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) as the major means tested provision.

AFDC principally acts as a means of support to single mothers, and is at the heart of an extensive literature which argues that welfare provision has gone too far, and is undermining the institution of the family. Dependence on welfare has become the major defining feature of the American 'underclass', made up of state dependent single mothers, and young males (predominantly black) who have withdrawn from the labour force and live on the criminal fringe. These young blacks are also assumed to have access to welfare, for which they themselves are not eligible, through their relationships with female claimants. The next generation is then argued to be brought up with a deviant set of attitudes and values, and the family task of socialisation to have been undermined. A new literature has emerged stressing not the

rights but the obligations of citizenship, the principal obligation being to work in return for support. An alternative view asks what loyalties or duties are owed to a society which has so manifestly failed to deliver its promise, and what kind of citizenship it is which demands menial labour in low grade work paying insufficient for subsistence.

The notion of the underclass has been adopted, or resurrected, to capture the sense of a group which is excluded, or has withdrawn, from mainstream society, in terms of both style of life and the dominant system of morality. Chapter 4 examines the contemporary debate in both the British and American literature. Minimally the underclass is defined in terms of state dependence, and culturally based accounts of the phenomenon are expressed in terms of socialisation into an alternative system of values in which the single parent family is directly implicated. An alternative view stresses the structural processes underlying the emergence of an underclass, notably economic restructuring and the failure of the economies of both Britain and the US to generate sufficient jobs to accommodate all potential workers. The debate about the underclass has been led by a predominantly American literature, and as a result the position of the black population is a central concern. Within a broadly structural approach, however, there are disagreements about whether issues of class or race should be given primacy in explanation.

Wilson (1987) argues for a class based account, supporting this view by the assertion that the civil rights movement has removed the traditional barriers to black social mobility and that the position of the black underclass is to be explained by their vulnerability to job loss in manufacturing, rather than to racism. Fainstein (1992) challenges this view, arguing that the black population at all levels of the social structure still suffers impediments to mobility by virtue of racial discrimination, and that the position of the lowest stratum is by no means explained simply by their concentration in manufacturing in an increasingly service based economy. It is rather, he argues, that a generally weak position in the labour market is bred of disadvantage rooted in ethnic identity. The very high concentration of single parent households in the black population adds a further strand to the debate; this is seen either as the result of a culture of dependency which also explains black withdrawal from the labour force through a failure to instil the work ethic, or as the result of poor employment opportunities for black males.

These arguments do not easily transfer to the British situation, partly because of the difference in the welfare systems of the two countries. Although there has been a growth of single parenthood in Britain it is on nothing like the same scale as in the US, and the alleged emergence of a dependency culture has been applied rather to long term unemployment. Nor is the British underclass, however defined, predominantly a black phenomenon, largely because of the very much smaller size of the British black population. Nevertheless, a good deal of the British debate has revolved around predictions that Britain is following the same path as the US. There is also a considerable literature addressing specific aspects of the design and operation of the British benefit system, most notably with reference to the work incentive.

A dimension of the British debate that is absent from American literature and is firmly rooted in a major tradition of British sociology, is the challenge which long term unemployment and changing patterns of employment pose for conceptualisations of social structure. Conventional accounts of the British class structure have been based on schema derived from skill and occupational rankings, premised upon the norm of full employment. Long term unemployment minimally poses the problem of how to classify the unemployed, though it potentially challenges a view of social structure based solely upon occupational ranking. A further challenge is posed by the changing nature of employment and the phenomenon of what is often termed underemployment: chronic insecurity and non-standard patterns of work.

Thus the study of economic change uncovers patterns not easily incorporated into standard class analysis, and one response is to contain the troublesome features in the residual category of the underclass. Further problems arise, however, over the constitution of this category. Does it refer to all unemployed, the long term unemployed only, the underemployed or those dependent on the state for their livelihood? Arguments for each of these positions are reviewed in Chapter 4, where it becomes clear that in fact two different types of social distinction are operating. Dependence upon the state is a civic status, and one which often carries with it a social stigma, although it does not embrace a homogeneous collection of conditions. Social class position, in contrast, is rooted in the system of production. Unemployment, however, much less underemployment, cannot be accommodated simply by a designation beneath or outside of class; at least not without

some consideration of the underlying dynamics of the labour market.

Issues concerning the structure of the labour market also arise in Chapter 5, which considers the nature and significance of gender differentiation in the underclass debate. Whilst this topic is ever present in substance, rarely is it made explicit in analysis. The most obvious example of the salience of gender is in work which attributes the reproduction of an underclass to the alleged failure of the single mother household in the task of socialisation, partially to be attributed to the absence of an appropriate male role model. Just as non-work is marginalised with reference to the social structure, single parenthood is marginalised with reference to the nuclear family ideal. Such an account might seem to suggest that the woman's role lies simply in the reproduction of an essentially male underclass. Their high level of state dependence, however, places most single mothers themselves firmly inside the defining criteria of the underclass. This then raises the question of societal expectations of women and mothers generally, but specifically of single mothers.

One account argues that society as a whole, and men in particular, are simply shifting the burden of poverty on to a specifically female population, and that the explanation of the high incidence of impoverished single parent households lies with the high levels of male unemployment. Other analyses are more critical of the women themselves, and argue for some work requirement to be imposed as a condition of benefit, which is in fact the situation in the US. This, however, brings women's socialisation role and work role into conflict, and also raises the question of their labour market vulnerability. In both Britain and America the principal reason that more single mothers are not in employment is because they are not in a position to earn sufficient to maintain a family and also cater for their child care needs. A similar dilemma is posed for the wives of unemployed men, who only rarely take over the 'breadwinning' role.

Thus the gender related issues which arise from the debate about the underclass stem from unresolved questions about the sexual division of labour in society. The assumption of a traditional arrangement between the sexes underlies the welfare systems of both Britain and the US, though there have been some changes in recent years. Nevertheless in both countries there is a complex interaction between state provision, gender ideology and the

structure of the labour market which militates against a real challenge to established gender roles (Morris, 1990). Any requirement that single mothers take paid employment brings family values and the work ethic into direct conflict, and touches on a problem for the idea of social citizenship. This is not an explicitly gendered notion, which is one of its failings. It is a concept of the public sphere, and stands as a counterpart to the notion of the underclass. But to address the issue of women's social inclusion and to resolve the tension between family values and the work ethic, the concept of social citizenship must also extend to the private sphere, the source of many of the constraints experienced by women in the public domain.

There is another sense in which the idea of social citizenship is too narrowly conceived, and that is in relation to the constitution of the social community. Migrant labour has generally been used as a means of creating a population of outsiders whose full membership of the receiving society is in some way questionable. The definition and control of outsiders in this context is to some degree bound up with the control of resources, and part of this process lies in establishing the terms and conditions of their entry, a matter of current debate with regard to the free movement of labour in Europe. These 'terms and conditions' are important with respect to two separate but related matters: the claim that migrants are to be allowed to make on the welfare state, and the position they occupy in the labour market. Chapter 6 provides some discussion of labour migration in these terms, and outlines some connections to be made with the concept of the underclass and of social citizenship.

The most vulnerable position is that of the illegal or clandestine migrant, who has no official existence in the receiving country, can make no claims for protection on either the legal system or the welfare system, and who is forced into employment which would be rejected by any with alternative means of support. In a slightly stronger position are the guest workers, or migrants allowed entry on condition of employment. These workers are essentially expendable, and recruited on this understanding, although in practice they have not been so easily disposed of. Whilst colonial migrants have often had access to European labour markets as full citizens, ethnic and racial discrimination have usually limited their prospects. Each of these categories tends to be confined to low-paid, menial and insecure employment, but in this they

differ from the 'underclass' as commonly defined: a category of state dependants.

The relationship between the 'underclass' and menial migrant labour is an interesting one. The migrant group cannot, without some adjustment of thinking, be included in an underclass defined in terms of non-employment, but are often confined to jobs which would not be contemplated by full citizens of the receiving country. This fact can be, and has been, held to demonstrate the lack of work incentive among the underclass; support for the view that welfare provision is too generous and is keeping people out of work. The counter-argument is that the guarantee of social citizenship should include the right to certain minimum conditions in employment, and the right to reject work which falls below that level. Migrant labour provides a source of workers who, lacking other means of support, have no such rights, and some writers have suggested that in this respect they themselves constitute an underclass.

Migrant labour is an issue which falls outside the usual terms of reference of the contemporary debate about the underclass, but serves to highlight a number of important points. One is the interaction between the structure and operation of the labour market and the guarantees offered by social citizenship. Recent debate has asked in what circumstances social citizenship should guarantee at least basic maintenance, and what minimum conditions of employment should an individual be able to demand? The emerging emphasis on duties alongside rights asserts that there are limits to the protections to be guaranteed by social citizenship. The target groups for the imposition of tighter social obligations are state dependent single mothers, America's disadvantaged black population, and Britain's long term unemployed. The position of migrant labourers with minimal rights, however, illustrates what the implications of such a shift might be.

The general consensus on the definition of the underclass is that it should include only the non-employed and state dependent, but how far can any understanding of this group be reached in isolation from an examination of the operation of the labour market, and the practical and political constraints which influence the design and administration of welfare policy? Broadening the framework to encompass these issues would allow us to integrate in one discussion the position of women, the experience of migrant workers, the circumstances of the black population, the dilemma of the long

term unemployed, etc. But how far does the notion of the underclass help in this endeavour? Does the current debate simply reproduce the limitations and errors of thinking of one hundred years ago, or do the same ideas reappear across time because they contain some fundamental truth?

Dangerous classes

There has been a recent growth of speculation and debate about the emergence of an underclass in British and American society. This concept remains ill-defined, as the following chapters will demonstrate, but broadly speaking it rests upon the assertion that there exist certain groupings which fall, in some sense, outside of an otherwise cohesive and integrated society. The idea will sometimes involve a biological argument, sometimes a moral judgement, sometimes a view of changing class structure, and sometimes the idea of inadequate socialisation and a deviant 'sub-culture'. Whilst currently experiencing some kind of revival, the notion of a substratum, residuum, or 'underclass' has been remarkably tenacious throughout the history of industrial society, and in this chapter we review some of its forerunners in British social thought.

THE REDUNDANT POPULATION

T.R. Malthus, writing in England at the turn of the eighteenth century, expressed concern about the 'redundant population', resulting from an excess of births over deaths, which he attributed to three immediate causes: the prolificness of marriages; the proportion of those born who lived to marry; and the earliness of these marriages compared with life expectation (Malthus, 1806; reprinted 1989: 11). Whilst he argued that the problem of over-population would always eventually be resolved by some natural disaster, an 'inevitable law of nature', his concern was to find a solution with 'the least possible prejudice to the virtue and happiness of human society' (1989: 87). The answer, he believed, lay in 'self-restraint', for 'If we multiply too fast we die miserably of poverty and contagious diseases' (1989: 88).

The poor, who suffer most from the effects of overpopulation, are, he argued, deluded as to the cause of their poverty:

When the wages of labour are hardly sufficient to maintain two children, a man marries and has five or six. He of course finds himself miserably distressed. He accuses the insufficiency of the price of labour to maintain a family. He accuses his parish for their tardy and sparing fulfilment of their obligation to assist him. He accuses the avarice of the rich, who suffer him to want what they can so well spare. He accuses the partial and unjust institutions of society, which have awarded him an inadequate share of the produce of the earth. He accuses perhaps the dispensations of Providence, which have assigned him a place in society so beset with unavoidable distress and dependence. In searching for objects of accusation, he never adverts to the quarter from which all his misfortunes originate. The last person he would think of accusing is himself. (1989: 106)

For Malthus the problems of the poor follow directly from their giving in to natural passions which require regulation and direction, and it is the containment of these desires which holds the key to the elimination of poverty and disease. His ideal situation would be that in which man retained a strong desire to marry, but delayed until he had good prospects of supporting a wife and children. His recommendations are therefore to restrict support for the poor, and to do nothing which might encourage marriage, or destroy the 'inequality of circumstances' between a single man and a man with a family. The proper check to population size is moral restraint, for the children of the poor go on to reproduce their own misery: 'educated in workhouses where every vice is propagated, or bred up at home in filth and rags, and with an utter ignorance of every moral obligation' (p. 112). Hence, morality is seen as the basis of a good society, and moral failure the cause of poverty and distress.

For Malthus it was important that the poor be made to recognise and accept responsibility for their circumstances, and be educated out of their habit of attributing distress to the failure of the rulers of society. 'The circulation of Paine's Rights of Man . . . has done great mischief among the lower and middling classes of people in this country' (p. 126). A call for greater public provision for the poor may be expressed in terms of liberty and justice, he argues, but in practice raises unrealistic expectations. The result is to