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## NOTES AND ISSUES

# Idle Thieving Bastards? Scholarly Representations of the 'Underclass'

Paul Bagguley and Kirk Mann

### Introduction

... ours is becoming in some areas an ugly society, the irresistible consequence of a large minority abandoned to long term unemployment and declining living standards. The underclass, so long prophesied, is now emerging, alienated from the rest of society, bored threatening and without hope. (Shirley Williams, addressing the 1985 SDP conference in Torquay).

'It's unemployment that's responsible', said Robyn. 'Thatcher has created an alienated underclass who take out their resentment in crime and vandalism. You can't really blame them.'

'You'd blame them if you were mugged going home tonight,' said Vic. (Lodge 1988: 241)

It is rare for sociological terms to enter journalism, popular fiction and political debate, but the 'underclass' succeeds where others fail. Terms and concepts such as 'marginalized strata', 'excluded groups', 'reserve army of labour', 'the pauper class', 'the residuum' and, most recently, the 'underclass' have all been used to describe a section of society which is believed to exist within but at the base of the working class (Giddens 1973; Sinfield 1981; Marx 1976; Jordan 1973; Gough 1979; Stedman-Jones 1984; Mann 1984, 1986; Wilson 1987, 1991). Very few of these terms are located within any coherent theory of social divisions, and most are descriptively vague. It might be argued that they are a form of sociological shorthand. A way of referring to a social phenomenon with which we are all very familiar. It is simply a matter of common sense, after all, to acknowledge that the working class has within it, or below it, strata that are particularly poor. That it is a matter of 'common sense' is precisely the problem. Should social scientists be in the business of reproducing 'common sense' ideas, particularly when these are ill defined and contradictory? It is doubtful that these terms mean the same thing to their respective advocates. There is considerable discursive 'leakage' between the respective meanings of each

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of these terms, with vastly different explanatory, moral and policy implications. In this instance a term such as the 'underclass' can be used by some quite incompatible bed fellows (Field 1989; Wilson 1987; Murray 1984, 1990).

Myrdal, referring to the unemployed, is often credited with the dubious distinction of introducing the term 'the underclass' into social scientific discourse (Myrdal 1964: 40–53). In the 1970s the term was introduced into Britain in rather different ways by both Giddens (1973) and Rex (1983) to refer to racial and ethnic divisions. In Britain at the moment it is often used to refer to the extremely poor sections of society (Dahrendorf 1987; Saunders 1990). In the USA the 'underclass' is portrayed as consisting almost entirely of those poor black Americans who live in the ghettos of the deindustrialized Northern cities. In some versions, such as Murray's, single parenthood, drug culture, violent crime and unemployment are seen as characteristics and/or causes of the underclass. Here a subtle shift occurs from the problems faced by the 'underclass' to the problem *of* the 'underclass'. Blaming the victim has a long and inglorious history in relation to such ideological imagery (Macnicol 1987; Mann 1984).

### **'Over There': the American Debate on the Underclass**

One American scholar, the liberal sociologist William Julius Wilson, is acutely aware of the abuses to which the term 'underclass' has been put by many commentators, especially journalists. His book *The Truly Disadvantaged* has had a significant impact on liberal scholarly research, effectively regenerating empirical research on poor blacks in the USA. His work is important for other reasons. His presidency of the American Sociological Association, and the invitation as the major speaker at the 1990 BSA conference, have highlighted his contributions in the eyes of British sociologists. Furthermore, he has revised his argument somewhat recently, rejecting the concept of the 'underclass', and replacing it with the notion of the 'ghetto poor' for precisely the kinds of reasons we have been discussing (Wilson 1991). It is not the terminological shift that interests us, but the theoretical shift associated with it. In his more recent work Wilson appears to give more credence to 'culture of poverty' types of analysis. Thus his liberal position is further weakened and gives further ground to certain brands of 'neo-conservatism'.

Wilson's perspective is quite different from that of Murray, and his argument focuses on the geographical isolation of the underclass in US cities. This geographical aspect is related to features such as the economic decline of the 'frostbelt' cities, the geographical mobility of middle class blacks out of the ghettos, the high unemployment for those left behind, poor educational standards in the schools, high rates of illegitimacy, single

parents dependent on public welfare and the development of a distinctive street based language and culture which serves to delineate the underclass from the rest of American society. Critics of Wilson have pointed to his avoidance of 'culture of poverty' types of theory, but note the ease with which his work has been used by others to develop such analyses of the underclass (Hughes 1989: 188–9). Wilson's analysis has some descriptive points of agreement with Murray's, but very different explanations and policy implications. Murray's argument, in essence, is that welfare benefits that are too high and administered too laxly lead to the ingrained deviant behaviour of the poor as reflected in illegitimacy rates, crime and weak attachment to paid employment. In contrast Wilson argues that de-industrialization in the northern US cities and the migration of middle class blacks has left behind those who produce illegitimate children, engage in crime and exhibit a 'weak labour market attachment'. For Murray the solution is to cut back on welfare to reduce the culture of dependency, but for Wilson the policy implications lie in increased state intervention. Wilson is clearly nervous about being associated with writers of the 'new right' such as Murray (Wilson 1991). Unfortunately Wilson plays into the hands of such interpreters by avoiding a rigorous theorization of the underclass.

By neglecting theory Wilson leaves the field open to those who he disagrees with to build their own pet theories from his evidence. He acknowledges that the underclass has to be located within the framework of the social, economic and political structures of the USA, but says little about how these interact. This lack of a theoretical framework forces Wilson to defend himself from the left and to distance himself from the right. Despite the value of his empirical research, he ends up sitting on the fence, being urged to come down on one side or the other, and retorting that he needs more facts before that is possible. Wilson, we shall argue, has since climbed down the wrong side of the fence. But, first, what about this evidence in Wilson's work that everyone has praised so highly. Is it really as solid as some would have us believe?

Hughes (1989: 190–1) has shown that Wilson's analysis is prone towards the 'ecological fallacy'. That is, Wilson's data is mainly in the form of aggregate census tracts from which he generalizes about the characteristics of individual people within the geographical areas of the census tracts. Consequently, Hughes argues that in *The Truly Disadvantaged* Wilson leaves the door open for the 'culture of poverty' explanations. If these locations have high levels of crime, unemployment, and illegitimacy etc., it is reasoned that most people within them must be prone to be influenced by such deviant behaviour. Wilson has recently walked through this open door to emerge embracing a culture of poverty/cycle of deprivation explanation of the *reproduction* of the underclass (Wilson 1991: 10). However, he still retains his fallacious ecological reasoning.

Hughes further argues that independent and dependent variables are confused in the underclass debate. Definitional characteristics of the underclass (dependent variables such as unemployment, female headship of families etc.) are systematically used as explanatory or dependent variables (Hughes 1989: 191). Furthermore, other American critics have challenged Wilson's argument that unemployment, single motherhood, crime, poor educational achievement are all causally related in a way that demands a single over-arching solution. Jencks, for example, has argued that the trends in single motherhood and school dropout rates are in fact contradictory. Consequently there is only a loose relationship between these phenomena and a complex mix of policies are required to deal with these issues (*The Economist* 1991: 35–6). We think this goes a long way towards explaining how it is possible for politically divergent authors to agree on the characteristics of the underclass and its existence, but to come up with divergent explanations and policy recommendations.

What, then, of Wilson's recent revisions? We have already noted that he proposes a change of terminology from 'underclass' to 'ghetto poor'. He also adds further emphasis to the regional dimensions of his analysis, noting that ten cities accounted for 75 per cent of the growth of ghetto poverty during the 1970s, and that most of these were located in the deindustrialized 'frostbelt' of the northern US. However, the real innovation lies in Wilson's attempt to reconcile his previous vaguely structural economic account of the rise of the underclass, with an emphasis on the local social and cultural milieu which leads to the inter-generational transmission of underclass positions (Wilson 1991: 10):

... the social context has significant implications for the socialization of youth with respect to their future attachment to the labor force. For example, a youngster who grows up in a family with a steady breadwinner and in a neighbourhood in which most of the adults are employed will tend to develop some of the disciplined habits associated with stable or steady employment – habits that are reflected in the behaviour of his or her parents and of other neighbourhood adults. Accordingly, when this youngster enters the labor market, he or she has a distinct advantage over the youngsters who grow up in households without a steady breadwinner and in neighbourhoods that are not organized around work – in other words a milieu in which one is more exposed to the less disciplined habits associated with casual or less frequent work.

What Wilson is describing here is not empirical evidence. It is not a summary of relevant longitudinal data, or carefully researched ethnography. It is mere supposition, but it is tempting for some readers to see it as a proven empirical conclusion. Wilson's innovation here is to compound the fallacious ecological reasoning of his earlier work with a 'neighbourhood' version of the cycles of deprivation/culture of poverty thesis that he has been at pains to avoid in the past. True, he still retains the structural and spatial restructuring arguments, but theoretically and politically he has lost or rather given ground to the neo-conservatives. Structural economic

changes in the revised Wilson model creates the underclass, which develops 'feelings of low self-efficacy' forming a neighbourhood culture which is transmitted to the young and reproducing the underclass. Wilson has thus lost ground to those such as Murray who wish to blame the poor for their poverty. For Murray it is still a case of the underclass rationally maximising their welfare benefits, for Wilson it is a case of localized cultures of poverty and low self-esteem. Whichever way you look at it, the poor remain poor because they've got an attitude problem.

A further problem is that it is not possible to adequately distinguish the effects of a local culture of poverty from the lack of local labour market opportunities in Wilson's account. Wilson attempts to argue that the cultural consequences follow from the decline of urban economies, whereupon the cultural changes have independent effects of their own reproducing the situation of the underclass. But if the local economy is re-generated and the underclass 'disappears', then this would suggest that the cultural factors are of little or no consequence in the reproduction of social disadvantage.

### **'Over here': American Commentators on Britain**

In the 1980s with the return of mass unemployment some American commentators suggested that an underclass could emerge in Britain. Thus the *New York Times* wrote under the banner heading 'AN UNDERCLASS IS BORN':

It is in the north of England, in the Midlands, in south Wales and in parts of Scotland . . . that a kind of underclass – deprived, ill educated, unhealthy, without hope – has been created.

This is a rather different conception of the underclass, one in which the ethnicity of the underclass is regional and Celtic rather than black and urban. It is associated with Britain's version of the US 'frostbelt' of deindustrialized northern cities.

More recently the US social policy commentator Charles Murray has reaffirmed the view that in Britain the underclass is not necessarily black. Instead (Murray 1990: 4) he claims:

There are many ways to identify an underclass, I will concentrate on three phenomena that have turned out to be early warning signals in the United States: illegitimacy, violent crime, and drop out from the labour force.

Here we have the key ideological 'pointers' for a classic right wing moral panic: 'early warning signals', and the classic unholy trinity of right wing demonology 'illegitimacy' (children without the correct sex role models), 'violent crime' (the threat to private property), and 'drop out from the

labour force' (and they don't want to work either!). In popular language they are just 'idle thieving bastards'. Murray implies that he finds the sexual activities of the underclass understandable and their dislike of paid work reasonable, given the provision and levels of public welfare. What he feels the British underclass needs is to be adequately socialized. The values of the patriarchal family and the work ethic need to be firmly driven into the psyche of the individual. This can only be achieved by getting rid of the: 'wrong headed policies that seduce people into behaving in ways that seem sensible in the short term but are disastrous in the long term' (Murray 1990: 71).

Murray is one of the lucky few who get the opportunity to air their prejudices in public. There must be many academics who would envy him his special feature in the glossy pages of Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times Magazine* (26.11.89). Indeed his 'study' in Britain was very kindly made possible by this News International Group journal. In many respects Murray represents a long tradition of commentators who have observed a stratum of hopeless degenerates, and in doing so, have played on a range of middle class fears (Pearson 1983). Murray's use of the term demonstrates how circumspect scholars have to be in using certain terms. It is hard to believe, for example, that writers such as Giddens or Rex intended the underclass concept to be used in the same manner as Murray. Currently, the various terms used to describe a substrata of the working class, but especially the notion of an underclass, are simply confusing and lack any explicit historical or theoretical location.

Perhaps the really dangerous class is not the underclass but those who have propagated the underclass concept. In the last ten years or so academics, politicians and writers have adopted the underclass and during its trans-Atlantic crossing have turned it into something vaguely 'yobbish'. Because it is ill defined and sloppy the underclass can mean whatever the user intends it to mean. Or so it seems. Vandalism, hooliganism, street crime, long term unemployment, joyriders, drug abuse, urban riots, a decline in family values, single mothers and a host of other 'social problems' have been pinned on the British underclass. Their existence is never doubted, and it is often just a case of arguing over whether the causes are social, economic or down to individual pathology. The conversation cited earlier between Robyn and Vic in *Nice Work* could just as easily be between Wilson the liberal and Murray the neo-conservative.

But how do we know this underclass exists? What evidence is there of the underclass being reproduced over the generations? These are the crucial questions, since if there is very little evidence of an inter-generational class of people located consistently at the very bottom of society, it would seem we are not discussing a class over time. Certainly in Britain there is virtually no evidence of an underclass having a constant constituency at all. In the 1880s it was the Irish, the casual labourer and the 'pauper' who

comprised the 'residuum' (Stedman-Jones 1984). During the inter-war period the long-term unemployed of the depressed areas were condemned as unemployable. Yet during both world wars these sub-groups of the working class were conscripted into the army and the labour market never to re-appear. As we suggested earlier, the cultural consequences of localized unemployment do not lead to the reproduction of the underclass. One could make an identical point about the Okies of the USA during the 1930s, when they were forced off their land to become itinerant casual labourers, only to be absorbed into the forces and war production during the 1940s. It was always their fault, never the fault of the collapsed economy around them. But the advocate of the underclass concept is not deterred by historical evidence. It is claimed things are different now, the causes more profound (welfare benefits are higher and these people have televisions!), and more difficult to address. Alternatively, if the underclass is not here already, it's just around the corner, the warning signs are there for all to see, we must remain vigilant (Field 1989).

Causality is certainly one of the questions that has to be addressed if any discussion of intra-class divisions is to be credible. Often the claim that there is a substratum beneath the working class proper is linked to the provisions of public welfare. For those on the left it is linked to the decline of the welfare state which has produced the underclass. The 'yuppies' have taken the spoils and left the underclass isolated and poor. The consensus of the 1950s and 60s has gone, and it is now a case of each strata for themselves. The underclass are portrayed as social cripples who have had their crutches knocked away (Field 1989).

For Marxists there are similarities between the underclass and the idea of a lumpen-proletariat/reserve army of labour. In this view the existence of an underclass is reduced to some key function they serve for capital. They are kept poor but dependent in order to encourage them to join the labour market when required. They also function to keep the wages of the employed low in order to stave off the tendency of the rate of profit to fall (Ginsberg 1979; Gough 1979). Why some groups rather than others should consistently perform these functions tends to be ignored. Since no team sheet appears with the names of the reserves listed what stops them getting into the field of play?

As we have already seen the right also blames the welfare state. In their view welfare creates dependency by undermining the motivation of the poor to work. The poor are victims of the 'nanny state' who now need to be weaned off welfare. As Walker (1990) points out, there are powerful echoes of the earlier idea of a 'culture of poverty', in which anti-social behaviour and amoral values serve to pass on a 'cycle of deprivation'. Despite a lack of empirical evidence to support such a claim, and indeed with much that contradicted it, the assertion is made once again. Public welfare activities, it is argued, protect the hide of the poor from the spur of the market.



Instead of working they can live off the dole, and, as time passes, even those who might have escaped by using their entrepreneurial skills come to accept these values. They express their natural abilities, not in legitimate small businesses, but in illegal activities. Drug dealing and street robbery replace small shop keeping. Family life becomes a thing of the past as young men and women abandon marriage in favour of casual sex and single parent benefits. Their offspring then learn the same values and the cycle is underway again. The answer lies in cutting welfare benefits and pressing the suspected members of the underclass into work. Of the public welfare that would still be paid to the poor it would be important to have a highly selective system of benefits to ensure that the 'real needs' of the deserving poor were met. These benefits would also have to be highly visible to stigmatise the recipients and to ensure that the spur of the market could penetrate the far more limited protection offered by public welfare (Murray 1990).

### **The British Debate on the 'Underclass'**

The notion of an emergent 'underclass' in contemporary Britain, consisting largely of the long-term unemployed, has once again attracted the attention of British academics (Dahrendorf 1987; Pahl 1988; Saunders 1990). What puzzles us is why both 'left' and 'right' academics find the concept of an emergent (always emergent never clearly extant) underclass so attractive when it has been so thoroughly destroyed by social scientific analysis. Most recently in Britain this has been done yet again by Macnicol (1987, 1990) and Gallie (1988).

Dahrendorf has recently attempted to make a strong case for the emergence or existence of an 'underclass' in Britain. It is not clear from Dahrendorf's account whether he thinks there is already an underclass, or if one is in the process of emerging in Britain. He is, however, rather more equivocal about its existence in the United States. His emphasis is on the inter-generational character of deprivation, suggesting that the underclass has been around for some time, and he even gives an estimate of its size – 5 per cent of the British population. However he writes constantly about the emergence in the future of an underclass and the dangers to British society that it poses. This underclass, according to Dahrendorf, cannot be helped by conventional policies to expand the economy, since they lack the motivation to take jobs (Dahrendorf 1987: 14). He also refers to it as a new class. He characterises this new class as a group subject to the multiple deprivations of poor education, unemployment, 'incomplete families' and poor housing (Dahrendorf 1987: 12–13). The implication being that there is a distinct fraction of the working class, or even a class 'below' the

working class, that has distinct political and material interests. However, Dahrendorf is somewhat ambivalent if not self contradictory about the underclass's political potential (Dahrendorf 1987: 13, 15):

The underclass is indeed not the source of tomorrow's revolution; it is not a revolutionary force at all.

Whether it grows in size and hardens in separateness, or whether the boundary between it and the rest becomes more penetrable, is critical for the moral hygiene of British society but also for its social and political stability.

This concern with the 'morality' and 'culture' of the underclass reveals the concept's wider social scientific brethren – the familiar old theories of the 'culture of poverty' and 'cycles of deprivation'. Such notions, however, have had a rather undistinguished intellectual career over the past hundred years or so. As Macnicol (1987: 315) argues:

... proponents of the underclass concept seem only half aware of its conceptual flaws and completely ignorant of its long and undistinguished pedigree. Indeed it is they who have displayed the greatest present time orientation, with little ability to defer gratification until the present debate has been examined.

Dahrendorf's uncritical enthusiasm for the concept and Pahl's (1988: 257–61) cautious and mildly critical response are somewhat surprising, given that the Department of Health and Social Security and the, then, Social Science Research Council devoted a major research programme to the examination of the inter-generational transmission of deprivation in the 1970s, and found the idea severely lacking in empirical evidence to support it (Brown and Madge 1982). The research was stimulated, or rather 'ordered', by Sir Keith Joseph's views on the persistence of poverty in the early 1970s (Brown and Madge 1982: 1). Joseph's central idea was of the inter-generational transmission of poverty through a 'cycle of deprivation', where inadequate child rearing leads to failure at school, which leads to unemployment and unstable families, which continued the inadequate rearing of children. These core ideas have been the mainstay of sections of undergraduate texts on poverty for years. In that context they are discussed critically in association with notions of the 'culture of poverty' (Jordan 1974: 1–15; Lewis 1969; Townsend 1979: 65–71). As Macnicol argues there is a cycle of rediscovery of the core ideas on both the political right and the political left.

This current cycle of rediscovery is odd given the otherwise widely accepted lack of evidence to support the underclass thesis from a recently completed research programme (Rutter and Madge 1977: 303–4; Brown and Madge 1982: 268–9). In particular evidence (Rutter and Madge 1977: 304) showed that children from disadvantaged families did not 'inherit' the disadvantages of their parents on a scale sufficient for this to be an adequate explanation of material deprivation:

At least half of the children born into a disadvantaged home do not repeat the pattern of disadvantage in the next generation. Over half of all forms of disadvantage arise anew in the next generation. On the one hand, even where continuity is strongest many individuals break out of the cycle and on the other many people become disadvantaged without having been reared by disadvantaged parents.

Proponents of the underclass thesis are preoccupied with examining the present and predicting the future, rather than rigorously examining the empirical evidence for and against their core claim about the inter-generational transmission of deprivation. In the current cycle of re-discovery the effects of a relatively short-term economic recession, or stages in the life cycle, are being conflated with the view that deprivation is transmitted between generations. The situation at one point in time is extrapolated both backwards into the past, and forwards into the future, with no evidence in support of this. In many respects it is no more than value laden speculation about the future. The concept of the 'underclass' is a recurrent political and social scientific myth, or, at best a statistical artefact (Macnicol 1987: 315–16).

The concept of an underclass conflates a number of diverse social processes and obscures a range of fundamentally different social relations. The examples given of the constituents of the underclass begins to reveal this diversity – the long-term unemployed, those in the secondary labour market, single mothers, blacks, young working class people.

This conflation and dissimulation has two consequences. Firstly, it leads to poor social science. It encourages the development of incorrect social explanations – for example the confusion of dependent and independent variables in empirical analyses. The explanations developed are frequently 'lazy' in the sense that they choose selectively from empirical evidence, or worse make claims that are not justified from the available data. Others, such as Dahrendorf, are worse – there is no systematic data at all. For example, the focus on single mothers emphasizes their marital status and long-term dependence on public welfare. It is then assumed that they inculcate their offspring with the idea that welfare dependency carries no stigma or material disadvantage. From this it is claimed that the next generation are less willing or able to escape. Is it simply a peculiar coincidence that so many of those who are thought to constitute the underclass are the historic victims of patriarchal exclusion? What evidence is there that women find social security benefits so attractive that they 'get themselves pregnant'? But even if this were the case, what evidence is there that single mothers teach their children to accept poverty and make no effort to escape it? Frequently supporters of the underclass thesis fail to rigorously test their claims in competition with other explanations against appropriate empirical evidence.

The second consequence is inappropriate policy formulation. For example, inner city initiatives which seek to encourage an 'enterprise

culture' as an alternative to the dependency culture implied in theories of the inter-generational transmission of social disadvantage. Irresponsible fathers are seen as a major cause of single motherhood resulting in the rearing of children without the appropriate 'role models', to use Wilson's term. Policies are being introduced in Britain under conditions which may prove to be punitively stigmatizing for single mothers. Implicit in the underclass concept is an idealized male model of lifetime permanent employment. This is very much a post Second World War phenomenon for men, and fails to address not only the labour market situation of women, but also the impact of changes in the patterns and opportunities of women's employment. Women are now much more attached to the labour force, albeit largely in segments such as part-time employment and the service sector where remuneration is literally poor. For the underclass theorists women exist only as mothers, not as participants in the labour market in their own right. Consequently they largely overlook the extensive gender restructuring of paid employment over the post-war period. Women's labour market position does not enter into their explanations.

### **The Underclass: Ideology of the Upperclass**

One never hears of the Wall Street underclass demoralized by their junk bond dependency culture! The divorces, white collar crime, drug taking, drinking, the phenomenal benefits of state welfare dependency (£7 billion in tax relief on mortgage interest alone in 1989), and the casual sex of the middle classes does not of course demoralise them.

It is widely recognised that in the past middle class observers of the poor discussed the impoverished in ways which served to 'blame the victims'. The paupers of the 1830s were feckless idlers who had been cushioned by the allowance systems. Malthus, Smith, Ricardo and Bentham set the agenda by highlighting the problems the poor posed for the economy and society. Fifty years later the poor were discussed in rather different terms. They were now seen as a residuum whose behaviour was conditioned by their genes, their oppressive environment and/or their geographical isolation from the beneficial influences of the middle classes. Social Darwinism, positivist social science and the racist language of imperialism were used to call for improvements in the 'race' (Shaw 1987). By the 1920s and 1930s they became a class of 'unemployables' who had lost the will to work. Confined to the 'depressed areas' of the North, Scotland and South Wales, they were required to undergo the brutal and futile Genuinely Seeking Work Test (Deacon 1976).

There are two features of these debates about the poor which stand out. First, it is worth noting how easily the criteria for defining this stratum change with wider changes in economic and social conditions. Second, the

dominant ideas of the day have been consistently used by the middle classes to facilitate a redefinition of the poor. Classical political economy, utilitarianism, Social Darwinism, eugenics, social psychology and, most recently, sociology, have all been invoked to 'explain' the persistence of poverty. This middle class 'gaze' (Foucault 1976) is firmly rooted in these wider social and ideological conditions. There appears to be a desperate need for the middle classes to justify their relatively privileged place in society by pointing to the failings of the poor. The history of racism and exclusion along with the dependency promoted by the patriarchal family, all this too is set aside. Once again the snap shot of today is super-imposed on to the Victoriana of Social Darwinism to produce a picture which hypocritically focuses on the poor. The underclass is the ideology of the dominant upper and middle classes.

We should clarify what we mean here by ideology. We are not arguing for some spurious dominant ideology thesis, where beliefs generated by the upper classes or by the capitalist system are apparently injected into subordinate strata somehow inoculating them against their insubordinate tendencies. We have both argued extensively elsewhere against using such models, especially in relation to the poor and the unemployed (Bagguley 1991; Mann 1991), and we broadly concur with Abercrombie *et al.* (1980) on these questions. What kind of ideology, then, is the underclass thesis? We prefer to use a 'critical' concept of ideology most recently associated with authors such as Giddens (1979), Thompson (1984; 1990) and Urry (1981). This involves an analysis where one has to demonstrate that beliefs: '... serve, *in particular historical circumstances*, to establish and sustain relations of domination.' (Thompson 1990: 56 our emphasis). Such an understanding of ideology does not necessarily imply a dominant ideology thesis. Following Thompson we would claim that certain dominant groups use such beliefs to help them sustain relations of domination. Hence it is not a functionalist model, it focuses on the intended and unintended consequences of beliefs, not on spurious needs of social systems. In our view the concept of the underclass is a set of ideological beliefs held by certain groups among the upper and middle classes. It helps them sustain certain relations of domination of class, patriarchy and race towards the unemployed, single mothers and blacks through the formulation of state welfare policies.

Of course the working class has its own ideas about 'dossers' and 'scroungers'. It would be misleading to suggest that it was only the middle classes who develop and hold ideological beliefs (Mann 1991). Moreover, legitimacy for the view that the poor are a stratum at the very base of the working class has been gained in a succession of historical periods by pointing to existing social divisions. The independent labourer was contrasted with the pauper, the labour aristocrat with the residuum, the respectable working class with the 'roughs', the 'affluent worker' with the

'underclass'. Since Mayhew distinguished between the artisans and labourers of London, observers have been confident that they could see clear demarcation lines within the working class. Today the worker who has a mortgage, a company pension scheme and a car is seen to stand apart from those who exist in the trench of welfare dependency. As with any ideological construct the underclass concept is founded upon some observable partial truths. Some working class people are indeed much poorer than others, but the underclass concept serves to conceal causal factors rather than reveal them.

The concept of an underclass is a chaotic rather than rational abstraction (Sayer 1984), and therefore is ideological in its consequences. A rational abstraction would enable the relevant causal processes to be identified and theorised. Chaotic concepts, like the underclass, actually obscure causal processes. The concept of the underclass, whilst in a limited descriptive sense is accurate – there are ecological correlations between unemployment and other social phenomena – obscures the processes that generate these apparent correlations. In our view the underclass concept because of its inherent theoretical, methodological and empirical flaws is a demonstrably false set of beliefs. In spite of this certain social and political groups insist in continuing to use it. It obscures the real problems of poverty, and the real state welfare dependency of the wealthy. The underclass is *the* ideology of the upper class.

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