

Gentrification and the Return of Class

JEFFERY, Bob <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0615-8728>>

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Gentrification and the Return of Class

Bob Jeffery, SIPS Fellow, Senior Lecturer in Sociology

A spectre is haunting Britain, not the spectre of communism, and yet the UK's most significant current challenges, from Brexit to austerity, from zero-hour contracts to changes in life expectancy, are all haunted by questions of social class and classes.

A decade ago talking about class was deemed deeply unfashionable, with Tony Blair declaring that the '[class war is over](#)', New Labour eschewed the language of class, downplayed its links to the trade union movement, and sought to advance a new meritocratic language of aspiration and responsibility.

This change was mirrored in the social sciences where an earlier focus on class-based inequalities, cultures and politics was replaced by a new language of [inequality](#), deprivation and [social exclusion](#). This way of thinking viewed problems of marginalisation as an 'unintended consequence' - i.e. not the fault of any conscious agency or interests, or perhaps even as a kind of self-inflicted 'culture of poverty'.

In Sociology this language has come under increasing scrutiny from authors such as Bev Skeggs who has investigated forms of 'symbolic violence' through which working class [women are denigrated](#) as well as Lisa McKenzie's [landmark insider ethnography](#) of her working-class neighbourhood in Nottingham, and Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler's [work](#) on how 'poverty porn' has been politically mobilised to justify welfare cuts.

Nonetheless, a problem with some forms of contemporary 'cultural class analysis' is that they now tend to focus either on descriptive accounts that [eschew a model of class](#) rooted in economic relations, or only [focuses on those at the very top of society](#). The former fails to account for the fact that different classes in society have different material interests and that certain questions of distribution may in fact be a zero-sum game. Indeed, the language of class is necessary for grasping these questions of interests and gain, whereas the popular discourse of 'exclusion' tends to gloss over who did the excluding. The latter ignores the fact that a much larger group than the 'elite' are implicated in contemporary questions of the distribution of resources.

I've brought these arguments to bear on [my work on gentrification](#) in Salford, Greater Manchester. This is one of the most concentrated spaces of urban redevelopment in Britain, outside of the London docklands. Alongside Salford Quays and the BBC MediaCityUK development there are neighbourhoods where the population more than doubled between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, and where development shows no sign of abating. These neighbourhoods are home to large communities of middle-class residents, yet also contain swathes of streets that are within the [most deprived in England and Wales](#).

Development has doubtlessly had positive impacts in terms of the attraction of investment and strengthening the local authority's tax base. Yet, it also has a significant impact in terms of lack of affordable amenities, the heightened policing of working-class populations and sometimes tense community relations between 'locals' and 'incomers'. It also generates a profound sense of dislocation amongst those who already inhabit neglected and stigmatised estates, and yet have to confront their social networks, memories and sense of belonging being swept away to remake the urban environment for those with greater disposable incomes.

Gentrification is a process where it is perhaps most obvious that the interests and actions of one social class impact upon the living conditions of another; one person's coffee house, wine bar or designer apartment is another's eviction notice or compulsory purchase order.

The last decade has seen austerity, widening inequalities, a shift to the left by Labour, an era in which [the social bases of the Brexit have come under sustained reflection](#), and Students' Unions creating the position of ['Working Class Officers'](#) (to sit alongside equalities officers representing women, black and LGBT students). All signs, perhaps, that the language of class is reasserting itself in ways that are unprecedented for the current generation of researchers.