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# The new urban intermediaries? The new middle classes and the remaking of London

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 London is being « made over » by an « urban centred » middle class. In the post war era, upwardly mobile social classes tended to leave the city. Now, led by a new middle class they are reconstructing much of inner London as a place both in which to work and live. However these communities are very different to the single class communities of either the old urban working class areas which they are remodelling or the suburbs of their middle-class childhood. They are multi class, multi ethnic and multi generational places and present dauntingly complex opportunities and threats to their residents – old and new. In this paper, I consider the argument that the traditional « quartered » city has given way to a « polarised » city (Marcuse, 1989). The argument that an emerging social polarisation is taking place in London has led to a counter argument that there is greater inequality but that this is not the same as social polarisation (Hamnett, 1994a, b). Whilst accepting elements of both positions, I suggest that the emergence of a new urban middle class in between the rich and the poor is socially and economically significant. This group has the potential to act as « interpreters » between the global economic forces, which are currently shaping the London economy, and its local populations, which have borne the brunt of the economic restructuring of the last quarter century. One problem is that all three social groups: rich, middle class and poor are ill defined. I have undertaken work on the middle classes which shows this to be an important, growing, yet heterogenous and non hegemonic grouping<sup>1</sup> and there is every reason to expect the other two groups to be

the same. There are strong conceptual arguments for accepting a three-way structuration of social classes (Giddens, 1973; Cannadine, 1998).

- 2 Although dynamics in capitalist society produce an economic polarisation between capital and labour (in an abstracted form), in practice they are associated with more complex social divisions. Rather than social polarisation, there has been a long-term growth of an intermediate social grouping which is able to trace its origins back the nineteenth century labour aristocracy and professional middle class, as well as more recent white collar and managerial groupings (Perkin, 1989; Lockwood, 1958; Gray, 1976). The middle and an under classes have filled the « social gap » in London left by the migration of the manual and routine non manual working classes from the city. These groups together with the social and economic elite constitute the major dimensions of the social structure of contemporary inner London. To what extent the middle classes act as social intermediaries and so ensure a degree of social cohesion becomes an important question. In most North and South American cities the existence of a social « donut » effect in the centre city, is largely the consequence of its abandonment by the middle classes (Castells, 1989).

## 2. Social classes and the city: London as a special case

- 3 London has continued to bleed population but, unlike other cities and city regions in the UK, it has attracted new populations, particularly technical and professional workers. Elsewhere, people are more likely to leave the higher their social status (Champion & Ford, 1998, 1999). Champion and Ford show that there is a complex pattern of in and out migration in London. They demonstrate a version of the « dual city » argument – the groups that are leaving inner London fastest are the routine non-manual and skilled manual workers. Professional and technical workers and « other manual » workers show a lower than expected net loss. The pattern is further complicated by significant differences between inner and outer London – with most of the distinctiveness just described occurring in relation to inner London. Recent work by Buck and Gordon (1998) which examines trends in labour markets also suggests a related pattern. They identify a process of « sedimentation » having taken place in the inner London labour market over a period of time, during which there has been what they term « bumping down » as a consequence of an upward drift in unemployment nationally. This occurs when people respond to unemployment by seeking employment at a lower level in the labour market. At the bottom end of the labour market this has created in inner London an increase in those either permanently excluded from work or in poorly paid and temporary employment. They argue that it will take a sustained employment-generating boom to begin to tackle this process of sedimentation.
- 4 London only became a leading industrial centre in the interwar years (Hall, 1962). During this period, and later from 1945 to 1979, the working class in London used its political and industrial organisations to influence housing and welfare policy in the interests of its members. This was facilitated by the Fordist accumulation regime in the context of mass production and consumption of manufactured commodities. The incorporation of the working class and its leadership was central to this strategy which came to a dramatic end with the election of the Thatcher government in 1979 (Jessop & al, 1988).

- 5 This economic structure and its social base was largely dismantled in the restructuring which peaked in the 1980s in which the least skilled bore the brunt – although the consequences were, to an extent, hidden for a time by the expansion of the services economy (Gordon, 1998). Working class inner city areas had begun to lose their white and working class populations to outer London suburbs and beyond in the 1960s. By the late 1980s, these inner areas were increasingly divided between those living in (rented) social housing and (increasingly gentrified) owner occupation, with high levels of economic inactivity and activity respectively (London Research Centre, 1996).
- 6 Gentrification, the social and economic upgrading of formerly working class areas, has attracted a rich literature (Smith, 1996; Butler, 1997; Ley, 1996) in which it has been associated with the rise of business and financial services and the development of global cities (Sassen, 1991; Friedman & Wolff, 1982; Friedman, 1986; King, 1990). Sassen, in particular, has consistently argued that this has led to increased social polarisation. Essentially her argument has been that the social core of urban life (i.e. the working class) has been eaten away and the social structure of major global cities has become bifurcated around a relatively small privileged group (of approximately twenty percent of the population) and a larger deprived one. This argument has been endlessly and passionately debated and, if nothing else, should have focused minds on what is meant by polarisation. Unfortunately, it has failed to do this. Whilst there is little evidence in London for the kind of polarisation that Sassen has identified in New York and Los Angeles<sup>2</sup>, it is difficult to accept the counter argument which is that, although there has been a growth in inequality, there is no evidence of polarisation (Hamnett & Cross, 1998). Much may depend on the definition of polarisation which for Hamnett involves the hollowing out of the centre to the margins i.e. many people have become poorer as a smaller number have become richer. Hamnett works with data for those in employment (Hamnett & Cross, 1998; Hamnett, 1994a, b). This may not be appropriate if one accepts a version of the sedimentation argument which sees people falling out of the labour market. It may also partly explain the apparent divergence between Europe and North America which have very different « welfare regimes » (Esping Anderson, 1990). In the United States people are forced into employment for bad pay with appalling conditions whereas in Europe such people remain outside employment and are able to subsist on state benefits. The data to definitively prove any of these positions seem remarkably murky.
- 7 Whilst Hamnett may be right in relation to those in employment this is a somewhat pyrrhic victory because of his overly-pedantic definition of polarisation which does not consider what might be « generating » new social divisions. Surely Sassen is correct – at least conceptually – to argue that it is in the nature of the new financial services economy to create these two worlds – as industrial capitalism did in its early years? Essentially her argument is that the shift to a « services economy », and specifically an urban financial services economy, cuts out those occupying the traditional middle position in the social and employment hierarchy i.e. the manufacturing working class of Fordism which had fought its way into incorporation. More fundamentally, polarisation is nothing new: the so-called pauperisation thesis (that as capital accumulates, the proportion of value available for wages by necessity lessens) was central to Marxism. It gave rise to an often sterile debate with its bourgeois critics who were able to show that there had been a rise in the real standard of living of the working class, so therefore Marxism was wrong (Zweig, 1961). For their part, Marxists were equally puerile. They hung on to abstracted

notions of the falling rate of profit and the growing rate of exploitation allowing them to argue that the working classes were becoming increasingly immiserated despite the torrent of consumer durables that invaded the working class home. In truth, what emerged was not a class polarisation but a middle class which provided the aspirational values for the working class and thus the legitimisation for processes of social mobility within capitalism (Dahrendorf, 1959; Lockwood, 1981).

- 8 Much the same process is now happening in inner London. Some are leaving, others are coming in and others are stuck but there does appear to be a pattern to this. White working-class people are leaving as a matter of choice – albeit a choice constrained by the lack of decent social rented housing. This suggests that the squeezing out of the « middle » is not a totally involuntary process<sup>3</sup>. This has been partly to do with the perceived racialisation of the inner city but mainly for housing, labour and education market reasons. An overwhelming proportion of the skilled manual and routine non manual workers (presumed to be white) who left Hackney in the 1970s was upwardly mobile into professional and managerial positions (mainly managerial) and from rented to owner occupied housing (Butler, 1992, 1997). Hamnett and Randolph (1988) and more recently Champion and Ford (1998, 1999) confirm this trend for London as a whole. There is insufficient work done at a qualitative level to show the reasons for this outmigration in recent years, so this scenario is somewhat speculative at the level of motives but see, for example, one of the original planning studies (Deakin & Ungerson, 1977). Robson's (1998) study of South East London supporters of Millwall football club would support some of these claims.

### 3. Social classes, social mobility and inner London

- 9 For most Londoners, especially those with children, there are two options: aspire to upward social mobility or suffer downward mobility. Even for those in elite positions, stasis is not an option, given the rapid change in the labour market (Buck & Gordon, 1998). In summary, my argument is that different social groups seek advantage (or to minimise disadvantage) in three different « markets »: those based around labour, housing and education. The comparatively « negatively advantaged » have tended to leave inner London, whilst the « positively advantaged » have been able to choose which housing and education markets to participate in. Those who are **absolutely** disadvantaged have no option other than to remain in inner London. The structure of these three « markets » in London offers choice for some and imposes it for others; a degree of choice which is spatial **and** social. This, in part at least, is the consequence of those who are able to exercise rational choices doing precisely that – the « exit, voice, loyalty » argument advanced by Hirschman (1970). Very few of the elite ever participated in the inner London education market, and until comparatively recently, there were few middle-class families with children using inner London's schools. These were dominated by the working class – many of whom have now left. The middle class has therefore had to reconstruct an education system to meet its need to pass on intergenerational advantage to its children<sup>4</sup>.
- 10 Where then does this leave the middle class in relation to the city and to other social groups? The elite have little interest in other social groups and could, if they had to, afford to live in social isolation in guarded and gated communities as they do in upmarket areas of Manhattan, Los Angeles and in most of Latin America. The middle classes, on the

other hand, are more or less forced to share their streets and public facilities with other social groups. Gentrification in London is largely a process of establishing social distance at the expense of spatial distance (Moore, 1982). Many gentrified streets in London contain a mixture of social housing and owner occupation. Many middle-class families rely on their non middle-class neighbours for childcare, cleaning and other services both directly and indirectly through personal, public and private provision. Many members of what Savage & al (1992) term the « ascetic/liberal professional » section of the middle class either work in a wide range of welfare professions or express an affinity for welfarist, inclusionary social policies (Butler, 1997; Ley, 1996). They therefore have an interest and spatial engagement with other social groups that pre-disposes them in principle to act as a bridge between the culturally and materially « dispossessed » and the formal institutions of the state and the urban environment.

- 11 The role for the middle classes at the end of this century, it might be suggested, is to take on the same intermediary role that the working class leadership adopted a century ago. This achieved for London during much of the twentieth century a degree of economic competitiveness and social cohesion. It was this that led to the so-called quartered city which Marcuse, somewhat confusingly, divided into fifths – the luxury, gentrified, suburban, tenement and ghetto (Marcuse, 1989: 703-5). The key mechanism for this was the nation state, now in the context of global markets and the collapse of state provided welfare, the context and role is necessarily different.
- 12 The new urban middle class is therefore **in** the city but is struggling to become **of** the city? The issue that concerns us here is the role the middle class plays in the urban hierarchy and how it relates to the social classes on each side of it. We are currently investigating this<sup>5</sup>. Our initial findings confirm earlier findings that it is confusing to talk of an urban middle class and that there are different groupings and that these tend to live in different, and differently constituted, areas of the inner city (Butler & Savage, 1995). Their attitudes and responsibilities to their fellow citizens vary particularly according to their perception of, and participation in, the education market (Robson & Butler forthcoming). Those who, out of choice or financial necessity, are educating their children in the state sector are playing a crucial role in the reconstruction of one of the most important social institutions of the city. Schools become the transmission belt from one generation to another but they also become a source of conflict for the gaining of comparative advantage. The middle classes are responsible for ensuring the reconstruction of the discredited inner London education system but, at the same time, they work to ensure that they accrue disproportionate advantage of this crucial positional good. In this way middle-class people are probably acting as crucial intermediaries by ensuring that the necessary institutions for social cohesion and inter generational mobility are reconstructed in a form appropriate to « informational capitalism » (Castells, 1996). The middle classes act as intermediaries not merely in potentially bridging new social divisions but also the spatial ones between the local and the global which are a source of corresponding deprivation in contemporary society (*ibid* .). What is significant is that the institutions through which social mobility can take place are developed, not that they are equally accessed. A working class child was thirteen times less likely than a middle-class child to access the middle class in post war decades. Perhaps we should not necessarily regard it as a failure if there remains inequality of access, it is the degree of inequality that remains significant.

## 4. Conclusions

- 13 I proposed in the introduction that the new middle classes were playing an important role in the remaking of the social geography of London and suggested that they were a key group of intermediaries in the new urban hierarchy with the potential to act as a force for social cohesion. I have argued that the case for a polarisation of the social and economic structure for London is perhaps stronger than that suggested by critics of the « polarisation thesis » such as Chris Hamnett. The intersection of three key markets – labour, housing and education – leaves the least powerful people with no choice and the most powerful with most choice. The consequence of this is that it is unsurprising if those with some market capabilities but with insufficient economic capital (or income) to access owner occupation and private education and insufficient cultural capital to plan and implement appropriate state educational strategies for their children, leave inner London.
- 14 Middle-class people who live in inner London do so because they want to. They are intermediaries because they are creating the kind of institutions which can, at least in principle, enable inter-generational mobility to occur. These include good local primary schools and a dispersed network of successful secondary schools which are, formally at least, open to children from other social groups. There is a return to the situation of thirty years ago when institutions for advancement were explicitly middle-class. In this sense London's institutions are changing. It remains to be seen whether these institutions will become a source of inclusion or exclusion for the children of non-middle class and non-white residents in inner London. This in turn will probably depend on how much time and effort the middle classes, once they have established the institutions, invest in their civic responsibilities towards those below them in the social hierarchy. On the present evidence, they appear to be investing rather more time in plotting educational strategies for their own children than making these skills available to others. It is possible to hypothesise that, unless they do this, the « quality of life » in Inner London will fall for the middle classes who, unlike the upper class, cannot ignore their neighbours. In turn, this lack of social cohesion may affect the economic competitiveness of the city as it becomes a less pleasant place in which to live.

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## NOTES

1. The initial findings from a research project that we are currently undertaking in London on the middle class and its relations with other social groups confirm some of the claims being made here, but which for reasons of lack of space I cannot develop here. These focus primarily on the workings of the education market and the different strategies that the middle classes adopt to maintain their social advantage for their children intergenerationally. The Economic and Social Research Council are funding the research (grant number L130251011) on « the middle class and the future of London » under the *Cities: Competitiveness and Cohesion* Programme.
2. Epitomised in Tom Wolfe's novel *Bonfire of the Vanities*.
3. Robson (1998) argues that such people retain an affection for the inner city – in his study of South East London identity for many of his respondents is embodied in their support for Millwall football club. They are reluctant migrants from the city and whilst seeking the benefits of the outer suburbs mourn their estrangement from the inner city.
4. We discuss the strategies which the middle class construct for their children and some of the consequences of this for other social groups in Robson and Butler (forthcoming). This is influenced by Ball & al. (1995).
5. See note 1 above.

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## ABSTRACTS

In this article the position of the new middle classes that are currently leading the gentrification of much of inner London is considered. The author considers the arguments over whether the social structure of inner London is becoming increasingly polarised. He suggests that the middle income groups may in fact be taking on the role of social intermediaries between those high income groups, who are not reliant on state services, particularly education, and those who are most disadvantaged in inner London's labour and housing markets and totally reliant on state services. The emerging education market is a crucial arena for the middle classes who need to pass on their cultural capital to their children. It is also an opportunity to provide institutions of upward social mobility for the socially disadvantaged. At present it is unclear whether the new middle class presence in London is a force for social inclusion or is likely to add to social exclusion. The author's conclusion is that the middle classes are more vulnerable to the costs of social exclusion than the upper classes and therefore have an incentive to become the intermediaries in London's social structure. Short term pressures however to achieve advantage for their children are currently working against this, at least as far as the education system is concerned. The relationship between the middle classes and the marginalised social groups is still under negotiation. Sections of the middle class do however have the « potential » to act as intermediaries and therefore as agents for social inclusion.

Cet article interroge la position des nouvelles classes moyennes, agents du processus de « gentrification » dans une grande partie des quartiers centraux de Londres. L'auteur examine les analyses selon lesquelles, au centre de Londres, la structure sociale connaîtrait une polarisation croissante. Selon lui les groupes à revenus moyens pourraient occuper une position d'intermédiaires sociaux entre les groupes à fort capital économique, non dépendants des services publics (en particulier l'enseignement) et les plus désavantagés sur les marchés du travail et du logement du centre ville, qui eux dépendent entièrement de ces services. Le nouveau marché de l'éducation constitue un champ dont la maîtrise est essentielle pour les classes moyennes qui doivent assurer la transmission de leur capital culturel à leurs enfants. Ce marché pourrait également proposer un cadre institutionnel favorable à la mobilité sociale des catégories défavorisées. L'implantation de la nouvelle classe moyenne à Londres constitue-t-elle un facteur d'intégration sociale ou est-elle susceptible d'accentuer les phénomènes d'exclusion ? Il est difficile aujourd'hui de conclure sur ce point. Pour l'auteur, les classes moyennes sont plus sensibles aux coûts de l'exclusion sociale que les classes plus élevées, ce qui peut les inciter à jouer un rôle d'intermédiaire dans la structure sociale londonienne. S'y opposent cependant les contraintes immédiates qui les poussent à assurer à leurs enfants une position privilégiée, du moins dans le champ éducatif. Les relations entre les classes moyennes et les groupes sociaux marginalisés sont encore en voie de négociation. Toutefois certaines fractions de la classe moyenne ont les moyens d'occuper cette position, de se comporter en agents du processus d'intégration sociale.

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