

The Old New Politics of Class

Mike Savage reflects on his inaugural lecture as Professor at the LSE, 20th November 2013

On November 20th I gave my inaugural lecture at the LSE and a podcast is now available [here](#) for anyone who is interested in my talk but wasn't there. Thanks to all of you who came!

This was actually the first inaugural that I have given (I was not asked to give one at Manchester where I worked from 1995-2010, and I left York too rapidly to be fitted in to their schedule!) and I was rather nervous. I wanted the lecture to be a statement about how sociology needed to rethink its conceptual and empirical tool kit in order to deal with the challenge of inequality in turbulent times of rapidly escalating economic divisions. I also wanted my lecture to be accessible to a wide audience (including students and non-sociologists), and also not too doctrinaire in its arguments. I hoped to engage the audience with thoughts which would encourage them not to think that I had the 'last word', but that the topic of social class was exciting, important, and provocative. Given that a few years ago, leading sociological pundits proclaimed that 'class was dead' I wanted to put forward a compelling counter-argument.

My nervousness was also underscored by the fact that I wanted to talk about findings from the [BBC's Great British Class Survey \(GBCS\)](#) – a large web survey with 161,000 respondents between January and summer 2011. I had been working on this project, along with various colleagues at Manchester, City, York, Bergen and Paris for the last two years. I was also well aware that the release of our first paper from the research in April this year, accompanied by a big BBC news press campaign, had caused huge critical reaction, much of it – especially from co-sociologists – rather negative. Whereas I am used to writing papers for peers, and for the pace of debate to be generally slow, and generally respectful, suddenly I, and our work on the study, was under huge attention and a number of critics were not slow to vent their hostility.

As the summer unrolled I planned my inaugural to be my chance to reflect on these criticisms and to be a chance to restate earlier arguments but in fact as I came to write the lecture I became less defensive and more interested in presenting the findings as a kind of self-ethnographic study of the reception of the project itself. This was partly inspired by the fact it came to light over the summer that as a result of the BBC news campaign in April, a huge number of new people had subsequently done the BBC LabUK experiment, so doubling the sample size. I wanted therefore to draw out results which recognised the 'performativity' of the web survey itself, but rather than see this as some kind of scientific problem, to explore how the selective take up of the project amongst the educated middle classes can itself be read as providing telling clues about the nature of contemporary class divisions.

I also made another important decision a few weeks before the lecture, deciding not only to focus on the BBC survey, but to splice this with a more orthodox – though still highly innovative – study linked to the [National Child Development Study](#), where I was part of a team which had collected 230 qualitative interviews from a sub sample of this representative group of Britons born in 1958. I thought that bringing to the fore the rich interview material could be a very good complement to the BBC survey, especially in allowing the voices of the disadvantaged – those who had not tended to do the BBC web survey – a role in my analysis.

Viewers can decide for themselves whether my lecture is successful. I enjoyed my exchange with Bev Skeggs (with whom I had previously discussed the project on BBC Radio 4's Thinking Allowed in May). However, I was certainly unable to convince a member of the audience who defended the importance of Natural Law in the question and answer session. One of my worries about class analysis in recent decades is that it has become a technical specialism which does not cross fertilise effectively with a wider sociological imagination. It was therefore interesting and

welcome to see the Marxist perspective on class given an airing in the discussion, which is a sign that class analysis is cross fertilising with the current crisis of financialised capitalism.

Our future plans for writing up our ideas from the GBCS, as well as some further reflections on the project are written in this [blog](#) which may be of interest.

The impetus is also being taken up in the current reading discussion group on the theme of inequalities being held on a fortnightly basis, as well as plans across the LSE for a research initiative on this theme.

I want to conclude with two thoughts which I took away from the lecture and which will inform my future writing. Firstly, the need for us to bring an analysis of elites firmly back into class analysis, which has tended to focus on class boundaries at the middle ranges of the class structure (e.g. between middle and working class). There is ample evidence now regarding the way that the very wealthy have reaped remarkable relative as well as absolute economic advantages in recent decades, and we need to register how this corporate elite is fundamentally bound up with issues of class. In short, we need to focus class analysis right at the top of the class structure.

Secondly, in reflecting on class identities, and the meaning of class – including why the GBCS had proved so compelling to many middle class and well educated people – but had mainly been shunned by the working classes, I found arguments about misrecognition and abjection (by feminists such as Imogen Tyler as well as Bev Skeggs) a very interesting way of thinking about how the life stories of the disadvantaged deal with their ‘stigma’ by placing it in narratives which domesticate it through presenting it as in the past. I think this raises very interesting issues about forms of reconciliation in life narratives which I plan to explore further.

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