Rethinking urban inequality, with Loic Wacquant

ABSTRACTS

International Conference
9.15 am - 5.00 pm | Tuesday 7th June 2016
Cutlers’ Hall, Sheffield

#LoicSheffield2016
Session 1: Class

Ethnography, place and class under urban austerity

Emma Jackson, Goldsmiths, University of London

How can ethnographic research help us to understand the construction of classed space under urban austerity? This paper starts with two rather different London-based urban interiors, a homeless day centre and a bowling alley, and draws on these examples to argue that critical ethnographic engagement can and should uncover the entanglements of policy, governance and practice that shape place. Both of these spaces are under threat. The first has had to reshape itself in the face of severe government funding cuts, while the second stands in the middle of a site of redevelopment and has been threatened with demolition. These two examples allow me to explore both the constitution of spaces of care and governance on the one hand, and spaces of leisure, on the other. Across both of these examples we can see how semi-public spaces are implemented in, and provide windows on, the devaluing of people and places in the contemporary city. These sites are also contested places where other kinds of ‘values beyond value’ (Skeggs, 2014) are claimed. The paper thus argues for: (i) taking semi-public spaces seriously as places where ‘the right to the city’ can be both exercised and denied and; (ii) the use of ethnography in providing layered and multi-scalar accounts of how class is constituted through and in place.

Social Class, Urban Marginality and Narratives on the Ethics of UK Welfare Sanctions

John Flint, University of Sheffield

The reconfiguration of the UK welfare system appears to epitomise key features of the neo-liberal and centaur state, with a state retrenchment from the social contract underpinning socialised collective welfare and increased surveillance, conditionality and exclusion enforced on marginalised urban populations. Legitimised by a new pejorative and classed political and policy discourse reframing understandings of poverty and the deserving, new mechanisms such as the increasing use of sanctions and behavioural requirements within welfare regimes are transforming relations between welfare subjects.

Returning to Foucault’s concepts of the duel and contested sovereignty, this paper presents findings from a UK study of welfare conditionality to explore how the operationalisation of sanctions, and their relationship to support, are framed in ethical terms by both welfare practitioners and welfare recipients. The paper argues that, rather than those working within the apparatus of a welfare regime merely being the conduits of hegemonic elite discourses or policy initiatives, they articulate complex, nuanced and ambiguous positions about the ethics and efficacy of welfare sanctions. Similarly, those subject to such sanctions also often adhere to a dominant ethical framework justifying enhanced welfare conditionality, while severely critiquing its limitations and its consequences in their own situations.
Session 2: Ethnicity

The French Paradox: when Urban Marginality becomes ‘Identity’. Notes from the ground

Fabien Truong, Université Paris 8

2005-2015 has been a critical landmark regarding the ‘rise of advanced marginality’ (Wacquant, 1996) in France, starting with ‘urban riots’ and finishing with the January and November ‘Islamic attacks’. Mainstream comments have refused to contemplate urban marginality as a symptom by tackling it as a drifting problem. The gradual shift from ‘territory’ to ‘nation’ and then ‘civilization’ (sustained by constant use of folk notions such as ‘ghetto’, ‘apartheid’, ‘French culture’, ‘radicalisation’ etc.) to (dis)qualify what is a stake speaks volumes about the culturalist turn which has occurred. Such rhetoric does not help understanding of urban marginality as a social phenomenon, although it profoundly affects its mundane manifestations. It also underlines the converging sociological properties and common (dis)interests of various agenda-setters. As a result, ‘identity’ comes to serve as the ‘articulator of the crisis and its ideological conductor’ (Hall and al., 1978, viii). It is, as it were, the produce of a particular moral panic in which urban marginality has been racialised over the years while the ‘race’ word is either treated as a taboo or… a ground-breaking key explanation. This binary approach fails to challenge the fact that ‘the salience of race in social life and social consciousness is a historically contingent and sectorally variable outcome of ongoing classification struggles’, thus requiring a patient shift in focus ‘from the demography to the genealogy of groups’ (Wacquant, 1989, p14).

Based on a 10 year fieldwork experiment and working on and with the infamous ‘jeunes de banlieue’ (suburban youths), I will argue that longitudinal ethnography is decisive in shedding new light on such a genealogy. By stressing processes and relationships, it avoids the current empirical traps in to which many observers fall (i.e. positivism, instantaneity or topographic worship). Looking at the vivid issues of education, delinquency or Islam, I will then show that the existence of a counter-culture transforming urban marginality into an alternative identity is a fantasy. Indeed, there is no such thing as ‘identity’ or ‘integration’ within the social world, but plural and temporal identifications shaping - at the individual level - a symbolic quest to rationalize one’s social position at a time when stigmatization is a prominent multi-layer process.

This bottom-up perspective strongly invalidates the current political framing of a paradoxical debate. Taking for granted the specific virtues françaises of the universal and abstract citoyen and of republican emancipation as an extraction of one’s social milieu has led French mainstream intellectuals to think around… globalised, supra-imposed and ahistorical frames. A conventional ‘conservative’ discourse obsessed with the ‘clash of civilisation’ mirrors a consensual ‘progressive’ counter-discourse advocating ‘diversity’, ‘communities’ and ‘respect’, but rather than opposing, they join forces and share the symbolic tasks in obscuring possible answers, with a particular penchant for wishful thinking.
The Informal Face of the Ghetto: Ambiguities of Power and Ethnicity in Italy’s Roma Camps

Isabella Clough Marinaro, John Cabot University, Rome

In an earlier work, I argued that Loïc Wacquant’s dynamic framework for identifying constituent elements of the ghetto can be usefully applied for understanding the complex processes that are producing increasing segregation and stigmatization of the Roma minority in camps in Italy. This presentation develops the analysis further, arguing that the Roma’s confinement, and their punitive and assistential management within the camps system, reflects various core features that Wacquant identifies in the contemporary neoliberal state’s approach to poor and racialized groups more broadly. In particular, the construction of a threatening and deviant population tackled through ‘pornographic’ policing as a response to broader social insecurity, the merging of welfare and penal control, and the state’s outsourcing of much bureaucratic management of the poor to the private sector, reappear – albeit in unique ways - in the Roman context. The Italian camps can thus be viewed as components of the state, straddling the prison as well as the ghetto; they do not simply reflect ethnicity but actively produce it, they seek behavioural ‘rectification’, and they indirectly serve various economic purposes. However, a crucial factor distinguishes these camps: their genesis, evolution and contemporary organization have involved a constant tension between the imposition of increasingly expansive regulations and their frequent inapplicability or selective enforcement by state and NGO actors. This has produced a situation of regulatory liminality which forces Roma to constantly negotiate shifting and unpredictable expressions of state power and control. Drawing on scholarship that views informality not as a condition ‘outside the state’ but produced and selectively modulated by state actors, I demonstrate that although Roma are able to exert some agency and autonomy within the spaces for informality that emerge, their conditional nature produces new power inequalities both between Roma and state representatives and among Roma themselves. Informality is therefore not a mere corollary of state actions in other spheres but can be viewed as an additional tool through which the state modulates care, control and punishment of dispossessed and dishonored groups. I thus suggest that there is room for integrating ‘the informal’ as an additional component of a Wacquantian analysis of the governmental techniques of the neoliberal state.

Ethnicity, Housing and Advanced Marginality in England

David Robinson, Sheffield Hallam University

A wide array of contemporary problems in urban society are now presumed to have their origins in the segregation of the poor and excluded into particular parts of the city, which are assumed to nurture cultures that assert values and norms of behaviour at odds with the dominant moral order and exclude residents from wider society. Within this context, attention in England has turned to the issue of minority ethnic segregation. Moral panic about ghettoization of the British Muslim population has been diffused across public policy and within popular and political debate through the paradigm of ‘parallel lives’. Ethnic and religious groups are presumed to be self-segregating into ethnic ghettos, limiting contact between themselves and wider society, undermining a shared sense of belonging and purpose and allowing misunderstanding and suspicion to flourish. This paper spotlights the contradiction between this discourse of ghettoization and social reality in English cities. It exposes, through a focus on the field of housing, the process of obfuscation through which immigration, diversity and difference are blamed for rising urban poverty that is rooted in what Wacquant refers to as the emerging regime of advanced marginality. The normalisation of precarious employment and insecure incomes at the bottom of the class ladder, together with the diversion of public policy away from tackling inequality and disadvantage, are revealed to be driving a process of intercultural convergence in (precarious) housing situations.
The Struggle That Cannot be Named: Violence, Space and Black Resistance in Post-Duggan Britain

Adam Elliott-Cooper, University of Oxford

State violence, and policing in particular, continue to shape the black British experience, racialising geographical areas associated with African and African-Caribbean communities. The history of black struggles in the UK has often centred on spaces of racial violence and resistance to it. But black-led social movements of previous decades have, for the most part, seen a decline in both political mobilisations, and the militant anti-racist slogans and discourses that accompanied them. Neoliberalism, through securitisation, resource reallocation, privatisation of space and the de-racialising of language, has made radical black activism an increasingly difficult endeavour. But this does not mean that black struggle against policing has disappeared. What it does mean, however, is that there have been significant changes in how anti-racist activism against policing is articulated and carried out. Three high-profile black deaths at the hands of police in 2011 led to widespread protest and civil unrest. In this paper, I argue that, over time, racist metonyms used to describe places racialised as black (Handsworth, Brixton etc.) and people racialised as black (Stephen Lawrence, Mark Duggan etc.), have led to the rise of metonymic anti-racism. While metonymic anti-racism was used alongside more overt anti-racist language in the period between the 1950s and early 1990s, I argue that such overt anti-racist language is becoming rarer in the post-2011 period, particularly in radical black grassroots organisations that address policing. Understanding how police racism, and resistance to it, are being reconceptualised through language, and reconfigured through different forms of activism, provides a fresh understanding of grassroots black struggle in Britain.

Social mixing and the governance of urban marginality

Justus Uitermark, University of Amsterdam

A number of authors have argued that spatial segregation reflects and perpetuates social inequalities. In this presentation, I consider how spatial integration facilitates social control over stigmatized groups and deprived areas. That spatial integration facilitates social control is one reason why governments in different national contexts have pursued social mixing strategies with fervour. Such social mixing strategies, I argue, have little or nothing to do with concerns over neighbourhood effects (as is often claimed) but emanate from policy makers’ concerns that they might lose control over areas. While referring to examples in different national contexts, I especially devote attention to the Netherlands. I show how social mixing was for a long time pursued through interventions in the housing stock. More recently, the government developed regulations to forbid jobless newcomers from settling in certain deprived areas. These regulations are applied in a limited number of areas but I argue they signal a nascent governance logic which enforces social mixing through law.
Policing Borders: Establishment Violence and Outsider Resistance in Europe and America

Matt Clement, University of Winchester

The European states’ borders are becoming heavily fortified barriers in order to prevent people migrating from territories imploding due to incessant warfare its citizens are determined to escape. The more incorrigible is the resistance of these people on the move, the more brutal are the measures employed to exclude new arrivals and stigmatise and marginalise those figurations living within Europe. Politicians seeking popularity for their intransigent hostility to ‘outsiders’, in Europe and America, are opening a Pandora’s box of violent acts by the established; whether they be targeting Mexicans and Afghans on the borders, or African-Americans or Muslims labelled as an enemy within. The violence of the social control methods employed by states is complicit with the vigilante violence within civil society. This paper will trace these civilising offensives and the new social movements of resistance emerging in a process of reaction formation to assert that ‘Black lives matter’ and that ‘refugees are welcome here’. Is it possible that the project fear agendas of the likes of Trump, Cameron and Hollande will inadvertently stir up a greater and more progressive wave of counter-protest that encourages belief in a more socialist solution?