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The disadvantaged working class as ‘problem’ population: The ‘Broken Society’ and class misrecognition

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The Currency of ‘Broken Britain’

From time to time, certain words and ideas that *appear* to have their roots in progressive thinking emerge to occupy a dominant position within political rhetoric, social commentary and media reporting. We are, in 2009-2010 amidst such a moment. The narrative of Britain as a *Broken Society* is rapidly achieving a currency in public opinion, in sections of the media and of course among politicians across a broad political spectrum. The attractiveness of this narrative is surely obvious: it appears to speak to a wide range of popular fears and anxieties about the state of the contemporary UK. It touches on real concerns about the crisis, or crises that seemingly characterise the UK today. Of course, the backdrop for concern is the deepest economic recession since the 1920s, with dire predictions for jobs, unemployment levels and for the future of social spending on all those services on which we have come to depend. The collapse of banking in the UK, the US and in other Western Economies has exposed deep cracks in the economy, cracks that have been temporarily repaired thanks to government investment on an historically unprecedented scale.

However, alongside the economic crisis, we have today the coming together (though this is not intended to imply a homogeneity in thinking or prescription) of diverse ways of thinking about the ‘social crisis’ of UK society. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has recently surveyed the ‘social evils’ that characterise contemporary Britain, with survey evidence depicting a population more anxious about crime, violence, drug addiction, family breakdown and a series of concerns around a declining sense of community, trust and belonging (JRF, 2009). On the centre left, some within the Compass grouping have referred to a ‘social recession’ (Rutherford and Shah, 2006) – the idea that the extent and quality of everyday social relations and social networks have declined in recent times, with a corresponding dilution of social solidarity. This is reflected in a decline in mental health and well being, increasing individualism and both reduced trust in and more fear of others.

Such ideas have in great part been echoed by other commentators and academics of late (see Minton, 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; 2010). While the idea of a social recession seeks to recognise that the growing and sharpening inequalities of UK society have undermined social solidarity, the underlying cause understood as neo-liberalism and the celebration of market competition and individualism. However, the idea of ‘Broken Britain’ or of Britain as a ‘Broken Society’ has considerably more purchase in social thinking today and, without wishing to accord it a prominence it has yet to achieve, there are already deeply worrying signs of the growing

pervasiveness of this narrative. Readers of *Concept* should be deeply alarmed by the baggage that this narrative is carrying and the ways in which it both constructs and reinforces the view of some of the most disadvantaged segments of UK society as a 'problem population'.

From 'Underclass' to 'Broken Society'.... and back again?

Central to the Broken Society ideology is a story of social welfare in crisis. There are different elements at work here: the idea of publicly provided welfare as failing to provide in terms of quality health and social care, declining educational standards, failures in inspection and regulation regimes, whether that be for standards of hospital cleanliness or the effectiveness of social work and social services safety nets and processes. The story of crisis is enabled in no small part through the coverage given to by now well known episodes that appear to show welfare either breaking down, or marooned in some kind of crisis. First, the 'Baby P' case in 2007 captured public attention and arguably its mood around failures of social services to provide care and security for the very young. Second, the Karen Matthews episode speaks to other crises of welfare. The conviction of Matthews and her partner for the kidnapping of her nine-year-old daughter in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire in 2008, provoked a Conservative backlash. Following their sentencing in December 2008, Conservative leader David Cameron declared:

The verdict last week on Karen Matthews and her vile accomplice is also a verdict on our broken society. The details are damning. A fragmented family held together by drink, drugs and deception. An estate where decency fights a losing battle against degradation and despair. A community whose pillars are crime, unemployment and addiction. How can Gordon Brown argue that people who talk about a broken society are wrong? These children suffered at the very sharpest end of our broken society but all over the country are other young victims, too. Children whose toys are dad's discarded drink bottles; whose role models are criminals, liars and layabouts; whose innocence is lost before their first milk tooth. What chance for these children? Raised without manners, morals or a decent education, they're caught up in the same destructive chain as their parents. It's a chain that links unemployment, family breakdown, debt, drugs and crime. (David Cameron, *Daily Mail*, December 8, 2008)

In January 2010, the conviction and imprisonment of the teenage 'Edlington brothers' for the torture and sexual humiliation of two younger boys served only to reinforce Cameron's views, coinciding with a spate of newspaper and other media stories about the breakdown of British society. While Cameron's term the 'broken society' may be relatively new, the state of poor people and the responsibility of poor people for the state they exist in is an old and persistent argument that has always been able to find a ready audience in sections of the popular media and among politicians across the political spectrum, and of course among some researchers and policy makers.

This narrative is hugely seductive: highly flexible, it is able to talk to a range of popular fears and concerns. It also offers an apparently straightforward way of making sense of the inequalities and social problems that are integral to the UK today. Importantly, the Broken Society narrative captures the convergence between social

welfare and crime control: both are seen as aspects of the same social crisis of the contemporary UK. Within this narrative a particular *problem population* is delineated:

As the fabric of society crumbles at the margins what has been left behind is an underclass. (Centre for Social Justice, 2007)

First popularised by Iain Duncan Smith and the Conservatives' Centre for Social Justice (CJS), 'Broken Britain' and the broader notion of a 'broken society' is increasingly appearing in a range of discourses about the social and moral state of the contemporary UK (Mooney, 2009). The same was true of earlier anti-welfare narratives such as Charles Murray's identification of a welfare 'underclass'. For the Conservatives, there is a clear understanding that the broken society has its roots in 'broken families': teenage pregnancies, increasing numbers of one parent households caught in the now-to-be-expected, 'culture of dependency'. As is evident from the CSJ's report *Every Family Matters* (2009), marriage and a stable two-parent family life are central to mending Broken Britain and to tackling assorted social ills. The idea that family life among some of the poorest sections of society is increasingly dysfunctional provides the ground for a renewed familialism, with the Conservatives promising to bring back some recognition of marriage to the UK tax system.

Such familialism was also apparent in New Labour's 'hard working families' refrain, and it is not only the Tories who talk in a language of problem families. Gordon Brown, in his 2009 Labour Party Conference speech and thereafter, spoke of 'problem', 'chaotic' and 'dysfunctional' families, 50,000 of which are seemingly a key source of anti-social and other assorted deviant behaviours across the UK.

Alongside 'Broken Britain', there is talk elsewhere in sections of what passes as the centre left of *Feelbad Britain* (see Devine et al, 2009), the *Brittle Society* (a Britain which is not yet broken and in which more resilient Britons can prepare for future uncertainties (Demos, 2009)). The political positions and the terminology surrounding broken societies differ to some extent, with Conservative approaches focusing on individual behaviours and centre-left positions emphasising the role of neoliberalism in eroding public-ness. However, they both share a vision of Britain facing the spread of what might be termed an anti-social individualism. In turn, this is related to an increasing emphasis on psychological or psycho-social factors in generating selfishness, assorted problem behaviours as well as generalised feelings of unhappiness which are regarded as widespread in Britain today:

In a society with relative material abundance, the critical issues of welfare have become as much about psychology and relationships as material need.

(Young Foundation, 2009: 23)

Under New Labour, there was already a steady drift towards behaviourist psychology as the basis for policy interventions. In December 2009, for instance, the Department of Work and Pensions announced that the jobless would be offered therapy under a 'talking treatment' programme to get them back into paid employment (*The Guardian*, December 5, 2009). Across a range of policy units and 'think tanks', strategies for engendering behaviour changes are increasingly popular. According to Demos, 'character' is essential for a good life and for a good society. The task is to enable development of the right kinds of character (Demos, 2010). Along with a return to familialism, therefore, it is highly likely that a pervasive moral behaviourism will be central to the development of social welfare in the UK over the years to come.

Problem populations: The misrecognition of class

Brittle society, broken society, problem society. In all the narratives that surround the discussion of social crisis in the contemporary UK, there is a recurring figure lurking in the not-so-hidden background. While there is an implicit anti-welfarism in some of these narratives, it is much stronger in the Conservative version of the Broken Society. Such anti-welfarism is entangled with ideas of particular welfare subjects as problematic.

The construction and representation of poor people or disadvantaged and impoverished sections of the working class as a problem population is hardly new. However, such constructions have an endurance and potency that should not be underestimated. Consider, for instance, the ways in which working class behaviours and working class ways of living are seen as 'other' to 'mainstream' lifestyles. Further, the label 'working class' need no longer be invoked. Instead, and indeed much more frequently, the label council estate is deployed as a euphemism for working class. And in the context of British society today, the council estate occupies a particularly important location, symbolic of societal breakdown. However, we should not make the mistake of interpreting the absence of the concept of class (though of course this does occupy a central presence in 'white working class' narratives) as a sign that such accounts are in some ways 'classless'. Far from it: they tend to be imbued with what might be understood as class racism, as well as an antipathy to working class lives.

It is important that we recognise that narratives which project the idea of Britain in social crisis or breakdown contribute to the maligning, stigmatisation and othering of some of the most disadvantaged sections of society. Such processes, what might be referred to as 'non-recognition' and 'disrespect', actually work to compound material inequalities and reinforces social injustices. Misrecognition and disrespect provide what we might see as a 'triple whammy': stigmatising the poor, pathologising social welfare and material needs as well as obscuring the maldistribution of wealth and income. It also impacts directly on policy outcomes and contributes to the growing entanglement of social welfare and crime control policies under New Labour since the mid-1990s.

Such entanglements are likely to become even more pronounced under the Coalition Government, driven by the idea of a social crisis, of moral decline – of Britain as a Broken Society! There are different interpretations and approaches that are being voiced around this now. Some of these have been referred to here. While there are some important political differences between these, we should nevertheless remain cautious about any approach which works, albeit unintentionally, to construct the problems of the UK as primarily moral and behavioural ones.

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