

Sociological Perspectives on Austerity

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Sociology is a theoretical subject which at its core is concerned to explore aspects of the social by gathering empirical data in relation to research questions. Commonly the data and questions are about British society and are of relevance to policy-makers – so much Sociology is applied. Many sociologists work outside Sociology departments – in business and management schools, social policy and administration, criminology, health and education departments. So it is a complex and fragmented subject, it is probably the core discipline in the social sciences, and it has been hugely successful at informing, and forming the bedrock of, cognate disciplines. Given this dispersal, it is hard to summarise what sociologists are saying about austerity Britain.

Historically, however, whilst there have been plenty of right wing sociologists, many sociologists in Britain have identified with the underdog and have been committed to explaining how society works, out of some belief in social justice – a tradition forged from its early days when Sociology enjoyed a close relationship with social democratic policy-makers, in the ‘political arithmetic’ tradition of the post war period. Hence it is not surprising that austerity has meant a strengthening of the focus of sociology on inequality and injustice, and perhaps something of a retreat from postmodern approaches. ‘Sociology and the global economic crisis’ was the focus of a recent volume of *Sociology*, the journal of the British Sociological Association (BSA); and the BSA has published a list of sociological work that examines the relationship between finances, the economy and society (BSA and *The Guardian*, 2012).

This short paper is divided in to two parts. In the first part, it explores core or interesting sociological issues about contemporary austerity Britain. In the second part, the research that is being undertaken on austerity in particular fields of sociology is summarised (in numbered points).

At the core of austerity measures are cuts in state expenditure. The outcomes (reduced benefits, wages, pensions and state services) have been severe for the more disadvantaged in society, who have experienced a significant fall in living standards and growing insecurity. There are profound differences – of geography and generation, gender and ‘race’ as well as class – in how austerity is experienced. These inequalities are increasingly taking on a spatial dimension, with the social zoning of cities and the disparities between regions becoming more pronounced. The south-east of England is becoming increasingly distinct, though is itself the locale of deep and growing inequalities.

Austerity includes a massive rolling back of the boundaries of the state – a restructuring of state services. Many services are simply ceasing to be provided or funded by the state, with 20% cuts to most government departments, local government, the BBC etc. Third sector organisations, which are largely funded by the state, have been subject to similar pressures. On the grounds of increasing efficiency,

other services are being marketised, 'modernised' and privatised, with the massive and growing use of contractors, which in many cases are large US-based corporations (e.g. G4S, Capita). Thus austerity is being used as a rationale for fundamental reform of the state, and of the relationship of the individual with the state, for which there was no manifesto commitment. In the process, some argue, we are seeing the dismantling of (for example) the NHS in England. Even if this is to over-state the situation, the NHS and welfare state are experiencing major reform, driven by the austerity policies which were introduced to resolve the banking crisis.

One consequence of austerity is a predictable growth of concern about immigration and threats to UK sovereignty. UKIP's agenda, reflected in the *Daily Mail*, focuses on cultural swamping and the threat to England and Englishness – and represents a powerful political force (36% of the vote in England in the 2014 European elections). Not confined to the *Daily Mail*, we see too an increasing stigmatisation of poverty. Such processes, commonly, are exacerbated at times of recession.

Whilst there is a significant back-lash against bankers, this has not been reflected in their remuneration or prosecution. Their practices can be bracketed with the growing concern about individuals and companies which do not pay taxes in the UK (or, in many cases, do not pay much tax anywhere). This has led to a broad-based opposition to Amazon, Vodafone and Apple – on the part of Parliamentary select committees, radical groups and a low level consumer boycott. It remains to be seen whether this is the start of some sort of movement for 'ethical capitalism' – as was seen with anti-apartheid consumer boycotts and more recently the ethical investment movement. Such practices seem to be increasing unabated, whatever the censure, with little in the way of a widespread campaign against them.

It is important to stress that there are significant differences between the constituent nations of the UK. In Wales the UKIP vote in the European elections in 2014 was 26% and in Scotland 10%. Such figures represent a part of the argument that was so central in the September 2014 Scottish independence referendum, that Scotland has a more social democratic culture than Westminster. The rhetoric about Wales is similar – that Wales is more concerned with collaboration and partnership and less with markets and competition than is England. The voices of the regions of England are perhaps those that are least heard. Nonetheless, one hears in England little reference to the need for constitutional reform – for example, calls for devolution in England; or a lower chamber for England and an upper chamber where Wales, Ireland, Scotland and England are all represented, where matters of common concern, reserved matters, would be determined. Given the Scottish referendum result, and the response of the Westminster parties and government to that, we can expect significant reconfiguration of governance in the UK, which in turn may well have consequences for austerity politics.

Turning to how sociologists in Britain have addressed austerity, the following is a brief summary of some of the main issues that are being explored.

1. There has been something of a shift back in Sociology to addressing class as a dimension of difference. This runs against the current of work on diversity, which has focused instead on a breadth of other differences – gender, 'race', sexuality, disability, etc. With rising unemployment, declining real wages, worsening employment

contracts, pension reductions and growing inequalities, more sociologists are addressing material inequality in new approaches to class (Devine *et al* 2005; Crompton, 2008). To a degree this is a backlash against the rise to pre-eminence of postmodern and Foucauldian ideas, and to the focus on identities and practices of consumption in the social sciences in the past couple of decades.

2. Much of this work is by those who are concerned with the cuts to the welfare state. In the light of benefit, health and social services cuts, they are exploring the impact on the poor – who are bearing the brunt of the cost of bailing out the bankers. For example, there is research on the growing stigmatisation of benefit claimants (Baumberg *et al*, 2012); on the growth of pay-day loans (Packman, 2014); and on how the banking crisis has allowed the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition government to pick up Thatcher's agenda in ways even she never dared – to roll back further the boundaries of the state.

3. Another body of critical research has been concerned to deconstruct the narrative of the economic crisis, and to explore how 'the crisis' is deployed in discourse to rationalise neo liberal policies. One example addressed Cameron's 'Big Society' (Dowling and Harvey, 2014); another is *The Kilburn Manifesto*, in which the language of neo-liberalism is deconstructed (Hall and O'Shea, 2013); and a third is on scapegoating (O'Flynn *et al*, 2014). These can be seen as the latest in a long line of cultural commentary on and textual analysis of conjunctural change in British society.

4. In a breadth of areas of social policy, the consequences of austerity for families, communities and young people have been examined. In education, for example, in the tradition forged at Oxford from the 1950s, researchers have been addressing the relationship between (on the one hand) specific policies (in England, foundation schools, for example) and (on the other hand) educational attainment and social mobility (Reay, 2006). The short answer is that education is becoming more rigid, with privilege increasingly being reinforced (and meritocracy reduced) through the education system.

5. Others have explored the implications for citizenship and civil society of closing and reducing the services of libraries, museums, galleries and community centres, loci of not just cultural activity and education but also communication and community (Newman 2006). Similarly, there is concern over the attack on the BBC (Barnett and Seaton, 2010) and other public bodies. Related work in media and cultural studies is concerned with the transformation of the public sphere with the growth of social media, and the implications of these transformations for citizenship (Papacharissi, 2009).

6. In the sociology of work, there is research on the growth of low-paid jobs, and of jobs with less security. A branch of the sociology of work and labour process theory, some of this connects the *experience* of work with government economic strategies. This body of literature connects with research on worklessness – with some families not having experienced work for three generations. Such families are concentrated in particular communities, for example those where coal mining was closed down in the early 1980s (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2013). In some of this literature, connections are made between between the sociology of work and social policy on poverty and social exclusion.

7. There is a growing interest in executive pay, company structures and tax avoidance – core dimensions of growing inequality (Williams *et al*, 2007). This research is confined to reward and has not addressed lifestyle and consumption – largely because the rich and powerful are much harder to research than are more ordinary or poor people. This builds on and connects with work on the social construction of markets (MacKenzie, 2006). It connects too with debates about the financial restructuring of state activities with Private Finance Initiative (PFI) projects – which were designed (by Gordon Brown in particular) as a way of keeping capital expenditure off the books of government borrowing, but which have ended up costing the state (or taxpayer) much more in recurrent expenditure as the capital is paid off.
8. Following the long-established tradition in Sociology to provide critiques of capitalism, there is a significant body of research that has explored the politics of neo liberalism (Prasad, 2006). Other work has developed a critique of the notion that society can be understood or represented as separate from the economy (Clarke, 1991)
9. In urban studies there is an interest in the north-south divide, and in the phenomenon that is the south-east of England – as well as in devolution (Morgan, 2006). The spatial dimensions of inequalities, and the very peculiar phenomena of the City of London and of south-east England, and the gulf between these places and the rest of the UK, are the subject of growing concern. These concerns lie behind much of the debate about Scottish independence.
10. The subordination of social life to financial imperatives, language and concepts has been examined by several researchers (e.g. Lilley and Papadopoulos, 2014). This work has examined how the logic of financial derivatives has been applied to social and political relations, for example by the subordination of the provision of public services and social welfare to the calculus of financial derivatives. More broadly, others have explored financialisation and everyday life (Bryan and Rafferty, 2014).
11. Resistance, in the form of social movements, is being documented – including research on riots and uses of social media (Douzinas, 2013). About 250,000 demonstrated in March 2011, and subsequently there have been ‘Occupy’ sit-ins and urban riots in 2012 (Cox, 2014; Castells, 2012). This connects with developing work on civil society and the public sphere (which includes ways in which these are being transformed with new media). Some of this work explores alternatives, or ‘what can be done?’ for example regarding local food production (Gibson-Graham *et al*, 2013).
12. Finally, within sociology, there is a concern to deconstruct the agenda of the government, research councils and REF to measure ‘impact’ – on the grounds that definitions of impact are bound up with marketisation (Brewer, 2011). There is also a concern to develop and promote the notion of the ‘public value’ of sociology, something of a re-think of what sociology is about and what it is for. Some of this refers back to the foundational work of C Wright Mills, who explains the purpose of sociology as translating private troubles into public issues; and other work explores ‘public engagement’ (Burawoy, 2005; Holmwood and Scott, 2007). Many of these debates come together under the Campaign for the Public University, which argues

that universities are a public not merely a private good; sociologists have been prominent in the development of such arguments about universities in Britain.

Obviously these are all interesting areas and issues to be exploring, and seem worthwhile ways of doing sociology and making it relevant. My main interests are in the first and last of those mentioned above: class; and 'the university as a public good'. The first connects with a project that I have been planning with others on elites in Wales; the second would allow comparison between German and British models of higher education or, at least, a comparative perspective alerts one to the fact that the British situation is neither inevitable nor immutable, but historically and culturally specific. No doubt others will have their preferences. From the perspective of the Berlin Britain Research Network, we probably want to be picking up issues of contemporary relevance that connect with our expertise and interests – to be identifying common ground where we can work together productively to understand 'austerity Britain'.

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