Living with the Cuts

Panel 3: Everyday lives and the cuts

David Harper, UEL

Papers from the panel

Angie Voela, Myrto Tsilimpounidis and Alice Sampson, UEL (Centre for Social Justice and Change and Psychosocial Studies Research Group): *Foodbanks: Charity and the charitable subject at a time of crisis.*
Ian Tucker, UEL (CNR and Psychology and Social Change Research Group): *Austerity, social media and mental health communities*
Corinne Squire, NOVELLA and CNR: Living with HIV: *Precarity and para-liberalism*
Tracey Jensen, UEL: *Austerity media, 'poverty porn', and welfare reform*
Sally Labern and Bobby Lloyd: *The Drawing Shed*

Discussant: Dave Harper (UEL: CNR and Psychology & Social Change Research group)

In this panel we've heard papers describing everyday lives across multiple sites of practice – socially engaged research with a variety of marginalized and often demonized groups: foodbanks; social media and mental health; people living both with HIV and neo-liberalism; austerity media; and community art projects. In each of the papers we've seen traces of how 'austerity' is affecting these groups in different ways. In their different ways these papers have demonstrated the complexity of subjective experience – how people negotiate the contradictions of multiple precarities.

We've also seen how this complexity is absent from much public discourse – indeed public discourse sees to almost require simplistic and reductive stereotyping in a process of 'othering' whereby the particularities of experience are neglected. This then means that public discourse does not do justice to the multiply storied ways in which people live their everyday lives. Unfortunately this leads to not only a poor understanding of subjectivity, it also leads to poor politics.

How might we have a public discourse that might respect the complexity of subjective experience and yet still allows for advocacy and political engagement? How might we have a public discourse that leads to understanding rather than blaming? (For example, media accounts are often framed as creating a necessarily oppositional 'debate' rather than 'understanding').

How might we have a public discourse in which those who are marginalized are seen as agentic rather than as passive recipients of welfare benefits? The subjects of these papers have talked, for example, of the many ways in which they give something back to society and many talk of how they would like to give something back. (In the Guardian, for example, Charlie Brooker noted that in Channel 4's *Benefits Street* "A

lot of what [the residents] had to put up with looked absolutely awful, but there also seemed to be far more authentic community spirit than I've seen on TV since Postman Pat's Magic Christmas. How you could come away feeling anything other than affection for most of the people involved is beyond me": http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/12/benefits-street-poverty-porn-british-fury)

But perhaps, rather than simply blaming 'the media' we might ask what are the drivers for these kinds of representations in the media? We might draw on more psychosocial frameworks to understand the unequal politico-economic system in which we live – I, for example, have a good wage and so do some of us in this room. This system almost requires us to ignore the particularities of the everyday lives of those who are marginalised. If it did not we would be faced, on a daily basis, with the harsh effects of these inequalities. How, then, might we have media representations that emotionally engage us without overwhelming us with inequality? How might we persuade media commissioners to include such representations?

There are, though, signs of possibilities for a range of ways forward. For example, rather than talking about 'austerity' which nicely avoids locating responsibility for the causes of the 2008 financial crisis we could talk in other ways. We tend to think that recessions are rare when, in fact, there are roughly 2-3 per decade, so there have been many recessions since the second world war (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2012/08/17/how-both-voters-and-politicians-misjudge-recessions/).

How might we change the cultural commonsense, what we take for granted? For example, we might choose political goals around which the majority of population might organise collectively. One great contribution of the Occupy movement has been the focus on 'the 1%' in whom the system is weighted in favour – the global plutocrats who advocate for neo-liberal policies which increase their wealth at the expense of others.   To address the rising house prices caused by a lack of supply of housing we might call for the building of one million affordable homes as Left Unity has done. We might also call for rent controls as the Labour party has done which would not only keep rents affordable but which would make renting a less attractive means of investment and act as another brake on housing prices. Of course, there are difficult political dilemmas here. Wilkinson and Pickett suggest in *The Spirit Level* that there is no increase in the happiness of a particular society beyond a certain level of material wealth. They suggest that an economy need be no more rich than a country like Colombia to provide a sustainable level of happiness. But how might politicians advocate for this? How might we persuade richer people to give up their additional wealth for the common good?

Lastly, and, perhaps a little more provocatively, one of the things that has struck me is that the vast majority of social research is on those who suffer the effects of inequality, rather than those who benefit from it. Perhaps, then, we need to study elites at least as much as the marginalised. For example, we might focus on the 147 trans-national corporations that govern the global capitalist system (http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21228354.500-revealed--the-capitalist-network-that-runs-the-world.html#bx283545B1). By which processes do these entities maintain an unequal system? And how might we then change this system?

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