

Interpretation of the Skeggs Text, Page 274 – Paragraph 3 - Page 276 paragraph

Throughout the process of writing this interpretation in a modern context I initially struggled greatly with the use of academic language and just how sociologically dense Skeggs extract is, begging the question;

“Who actually writes this way?” and “Is this even necessary?”

Throughout this interpretation however, and through the use of limited academic talent, the exercise has been useful, exploring the limitations of language, culture and class under a capitalist framework, and while such language is not accessible, it still serves a purpose to understand (in somewhat pretentious ways) the extent of the history of social class inequality and how it informs ongoing understanding and social class issues.

In this interpretation I will explore the many reasons that this text holds truth in a present day analysis of working class categorisation and connotations, indeed how class language is still defined and applied to groups of people or individuals. In this interpretation of the text I will focus on the themes of ‘otherness’, especially in regards to the ‘urban poor’ and ‘degenerate’ in the context of our present day. I will highlight the somewhat unchanged definitions of class categorisation, and offer some new insights to consider how these may or may not be useful in shaping the conversation about class and culture moving forward.

In capitalist society there often has to be the visible ‘looser’, the unspoken threat, the homeless man sitting out in the rain, of course many see this as a failing; whether that be personal or systemic, but in fact, such desperate circumstance serve as an important visual message, a reminder in fact, of the ‘degenerate’ that Skeggs and McInlock mention. When we think of social classes today we are less informed by ideas of excrement, or associations with ‘the back passage’. However, history has repeatedly shown it’s useful to exert a degree of ‘othering’ to maintain power. When one group of people are actively exploiting another, take minimum wage jobs for example, there’s an inherent idea that “it’s better than nothing” as if engaging with serving the middle class companies keeps low income earners from being completely ‘useless’ -and falling off the social pecking order all together. In these circumstances, substandard, or rather, different standards apply to the worker, shorter breaks, less frequent holidays, zero-hour contracts, and the most

damaging of all- the knowledge that one could be very easily replaced/too become homeless.

The stigmatisation and demonization of the benefit class, is best understood through this lens of the un-rested (or angered) working class that hasn't had enough rest, sleep, or is inadequately economically compensated to relieve the stress of poverty. Naturally tensions will rise; ironically not between the elite, the upper or even the middle classes, but the working class and the 'benefit class'. This is particularly interesting as the two have the thinnest merging point that any of the other classes. While the language used in Skeggs text is deeply offensive, suggesting the working class is dirty or degenerate, these patterns can still be seen today in sensationalist tabloid stories of benefit claimants that are 'lazy', 'scroungers, or othering/xenophobic language aimed at 'illegal' immigrants coming for 'an easy ride' or to somehow drain our resources.

Shortly after Skeggs published this text in the UK we saw the rise of a new categorisation of social class, a differentiation between the working class and the 'working poor', and then those who are from working class backgrounds and will hopefully 'go on' to exercise social mobility, the working class, fragmented into 'new affluent workers', 'traditional working class', 'emergent service worker' and 'poverty/benefit class.' These specific categories are however still largely constructed with the points of ownership that Skeggs outlines:

...“if the reform law (political representation through property ownership) was key to the formation of the middle class, the Poor law (basic economic sub-sistence) was significant to the establishment of the working class. In these differentially invested and incited formations- one that makes political claims for legitimated legal property ownership, and one that forced recipients to perform their morality...for the welfare system to stay alive- class differences come into effect...”

We can see this is still a huge contributing factor to the social class one may fall into- owning your home or paying a mortgage offers unimaginable relief when compared to the paradoxes of renting; how many renters struggle to save for a house deposit? Often renting is more expensive than monthly mortgage payments, however, as mortgage applicants they're deemed to have too little or too unstable an income to be awarded with their first home purchase. Posing the simple question

“do you pay for your own home with your own investments? (mortgage) or do you pay for your own home by funding someone else’s investments? (rent)” as Skeggs mentions these basic criterias are still just as current today than over the last 100 years.

(It’s around this point I remembered I was free to simply list thoughts and ideas rather than make an awkward essay style thing....)

(Lists make the world go round).....

List of thoughts inspired by Skeggs text in a modern day context

- While today, in 2021 you’d imagine that the somewhat barbaric comparisons in Skeggs text that the “generalised poor “to be “represented as excrement” are extremist views long left in the past. However diluted versions are still at play in less literally noticeable ways. Take applying for benefits in order to survive for example, at what point into the process does one feel the attitudes of working friends and family members shift? Skeggs repeats the word “degenerate” as in not contributing to capitalist society- At what point in the process of becoming a benefit claimant do attitudes change, from human to claimant, from prospect to problem? Through the lens of late stage capitalism, we can see recent statistics reveal up to 70% of first time home buyers have large gifted funds from their (middle class) parents, those who managed to make their companies or money during the economic boom of the 1990s. This means not only does class define your past but also your life trajectory going forth, ones economic emancipation from rent, class, in these terms can act as a ‘forecast’ just like Skegg’s suggests, not only does class effect how you will be treated by those in power, but how many limitations are imposed on ones ‘access to’ succeed and the discourse used to describe such people.
- Working classes are not only at a greater risk of general disease but have been affected by the pandemic disproportionately when compared to middle class people. Even discussing such phenomenon is likely, as Skeggs suggested, to further the semiotic relations in discourse that couple working classes along with ‘poor hygiene’ or

‘contagion’ even today, especially in the context of the pandemic. It how Skeggs outlines, a serious ‘catch 22’ in other areas of advocacy too, like Engels trying to shine light on an unfair situation of class inequality, indirectly affirms certain (working class) issues to be (inherently) expected, like in the NGO world of fundraising; the term “poverty porn” was coined by Jorgan lissner (1981) pointing out the dangers of focusing on the starving, malnourished, dirty child, as this focuses merely on a symptom of capitalist failure rather than a solution, however these images, while somewhat useful for raising awareness also cement damaging ideas of those from other social classes, countries, races and cultures, risking firm beliefs that such people cannot help themselves, are unattractive business associates or ‘charity cases’.

- The issues at play here is not only that such analysis makes it dangerous to call out any effort to help a non privileged group for fear of further stigmatising them, but largely that the systemic issues that create this outcome in the first place have been completely ignored. In more recent years not only has the disparities between the social classes been acknowledged as a gross inequality, (a fresh understanding of the 1% vs the 99% and in UK domestic politics the rise and fall of Corbynism) but particular attention to the lack of equity within one social class; to what extent do the intersections of sexuality, race and gender have on their access to good housing, health or the ‘right’ to life itself?
- The newly termed phrase; ‘necropolitics’ highlights the vast differences in life chances between people that have largely been (wrongly) banded together. Literally it translates as “politics of death” but more aptly the ‘politics of justified death’. Who must die in order for the others to live? It largely comes down to capitalist worth; afterall we live in a capitalist society. Necropolitics shines light on the fact that government policies directly, and more importantly; knowingly, prevents certain groups of people from living as safely as they otherwise could. This was starkly demonstrated by the tragedy of Grenfell tower fire; “Leslie Thomas QC, who represents 23 clients,

used his opening statement to stress that the 2017 fire was “inextricably linked with race”. Of the residents who died in the fire, 85% were from ethnic minorities. Official housing surveys have found that 40% of high-rise residents in the social rented sector are from BAME communities which make up 14% of the population”(<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jul/26/grenfell-families-want-inquiry-to-look-at-role-of-race-and-class-in-tragedy>) Such safety issues were known yet ignored by a government who largely does not relate to, as Skeggs put it ‘the urban poor’... “The closer you are to dominant power, the more your life is worth... if you’re a straight, white, able-bodied, cisgender, wealthy, Christian man, this is great news for you. But the further away you are from those axes of privilege, the less your life is worth under the logics of necropolitics — and the more precarious your existence becomes. (<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-is-necropolitics>). The necropolitics of the economic response to the pandemic financial crisis in the UK showed a keen hand to help those who are, more than likely, middle class. Economic relief came in the form of three month mortgage breaks and furlough to staff on proper contracts. Times were admittedly hard for people and so the government responded... right? The confusion comes about when considering the same government offered no such relief to renters (more likely working class as Skeggs mentions), there was no enforceable hiatus of rent payments. And for self employed people, there was no furlough to the sum of 80% of recent earnings. The inequalities affecting the top and bottom earners in the UK have not only been growing since the 2008 economic crash, but have significantly deepened in the pandemic, and what’s all together more sobering is that the policy makers are aware that creating austerity measures do contribute to higher mortality rates among the working classes – problematically some lives simply matter less.

- Poverty is not only engineered but it’s ‘justified’ and selective in who it affects, for how long, and to what end. More unemployed and disabled people have died under this current UK government than ever before, necropolitics therefore is a useful tool which considers the diminishing

chances of coincidence, it's through such intensive analysis of not only class, but the language and criteria checked that assign class, as Skeggs suggests, and with such constantly refreshing conversation and discourse, pressing issues about race and class cannot be denied.

- Skeggs asserts that “ideas about what constitutes social classes are often moral battle grounds.” While we move forward it's important to recognise that many people identify social class as a ‘feeling’ or a nostalgia that comes with certain family stories, a fairly new phenomenon not outlined in Skeggs text is the stark lack of accountability and transparency some claims to ‘working classness’ actually have, and what is actually just considered ‘cool’ or ‘authentic’ and therefore desirable. (see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/18/why-professional-middle-class-brits-insist-working-class>)
- This need for resistance, to reclaim the ‘othered’ can also be seen in LGBTQ+ communities fighting back for fairer, more equal rights of expression of their sexuality, not shame or secrecy, but a celebration of pride. This also applies to ‘chav’ culture, and in drag performance, the agility of what was originally ‘underground scenes only’ may well become fetishised as Skeggs argued, this doesn't necessarily reduce to a bad outcome; but newly found “a source of desire” providing of course there is consent and autonomy.
- How the deviant, the forbidden, the filthy, evolved to become the lusted, the wanted, the promiscuous sex symbol, and while the working class woman was most likely not as readily available for sex as Skeggs suggests the shift in male attitudes and discourse are interesting, as is the comparison between the working class and aristocracy sharing values of unrestricted sexual decadence. That serves to define the middle classes by virtue of moderation or control.