

BOOK REVIEW

Rethinking Social Exclusion: The End of the Social?

Simon Winlow and Steve Hall
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There is something troubling about the persistent debates about social exclusion. Focus on drawing the inclusion-exclusion line seems to make it difficult to gauge a critical understanding of that which is 'included' by social institutions. Simon Winlow and Steven Hall's recent intervention in this debate is a welcome contribution because it refuses this logic, instead focusing on the stakes of social regulation for both included and excluded groups. Taking this step back from the inclusion-exclusion binary opens up a very different, and very productive, approach both in terms of a critical policy review and the academic arguments it makes.

Rethinking social exclusion is driven by a profound lack of satisfaction with perspectives that situate the most precarious sections of the working class as outside the social. The book swiftly dismisses what it takes to be the moralism of three dominant traditions labouring with the notion of social exclusion: conservative, left-liberal and social democratic perspectives. One could perhaps go as far as saying that Winlow and Hall declare war on the entire field they are engaging with, complaining that it is theoretically unstimulating, overly empirical and obsessed with shallow policy fixes, thus leaving systemic injustice in place. Recent academic and political preoccupation with the notion of social exclusion itself is accused of being superficial, addressing effects rather than the causes of deprivation and marginality.

Winlow and Hall's response, following a broadly but at times unorthodox Marxist script, is certainly effective in that it clearly offers an alternative to the type of academic project they are trying to frame as obsessively safe and shallow. The book makes a good case for studies that dare to be more theoretical by placing the mechanisms and processes that produce social exclusion at the centre, rather than taking these as given. The argument advanced in *Rethinking social exclusion* proceeds through a series of short and easily digested chapters, each introducing a key discussion on social policy and social exclusion. The reader is first familiarized with recent debates in European social sciences. Then comes a critique of Charles Murray's *Losing ground* (1984), a foundational text for American neoliberal reformers. After this follow two brief chapters trying to tie together post-crash economics with neoliberal philanthropy and to reflect on the post-political predicaments after the neoliberal turn.

However, the most interesting section is the two chapters that draw on how the orthodox Marxist position that marginal groups function as an 'industrial reserve army' acting as a pressure on all workers within an economy and how such theories have been modified by consumer society. Here, Winlow and Hall agree with critics arguing that neoliberal globalization has extended the pressure of the unemployed beyond the nation state. While the global economy is increasingly associated with downward mobility of the 'post-middle class', the triumph of the neoliberal subject-as-consumer is increasing the tensions between possible and actual lifestyles.

It is in this context that the notion of 'immaterial labour' is introduced as a key term to tie these strands together. This concept is taken from *Operaismo*, an Italian post-Marxist tradition, and perhaps best known in Anglophone academia from Antonio Negri and Michale Hardt's *Empire* (2000). By participating in the dispersed immaterial production of thought, affect and culture, large groups are simultaneously integrated, exploited and assigned a subordinate role in the digital economy, according to the authors' reading of Negri and Hardt. Posting on social media can from this perspective be seen as both a necessity for huge, speculative private profits and a way to produce the identities that mark out the well-adapted social media users confirming their class position from those merely seeking temporary enjoyment and an escape from a miserable life on the social periphery. This process is taken to fuel a 'self-exclusion from the social' and the birth of a 'post-social' world. The final two chapters expand this argument by a series of examples drawing in a broad range of issues into the analysis.

If the implicit politics of the book is a return to a more universalist and interventionist state that charts and regulates the social at a structural level, the question one is left with is what this kind of social government would look like. A nostalgic invocation of a radicalised social democratic state seem to be the answer offered between the lines by Winlow and Hall, despite this position being criticised by the authors in a number of places. One alternative to further explore this problem could have been to delve deeper into the Italian post-Marxist discussion.

In particular, a second current of the same Italian debate could perhaps have been useful to extend the argument about the state of the social. *Operaismo*'s discussion on the reproduction of labour power was just as groundbreaking as its discussion on immaterial labour, and would provide a useful theoretical grid for several contemporary exchanges about the social. This debate contained several different strands, including Italian feminist scholars' early investigations into the gendering of reproductive labour leading up to the international 'Wages for Housework' campaign.

As important for understanding the making of the living conditions of today's highly differentiated workforce would be the discussion following Mario Tronti's argument that the disciplinary technologies of the Fordist workplace had become the dominant means of rule across an entire 'social factory' (Wright, 2002). This line of reasoning has since famously informed Antonio Negri's engagement with Foucault's idea of biopolitics and Deleuze's notion of 'societies of control', to highlight the rigorous manner in which the production of populations, relations and capacities of contemporary capitalism are scientifically managed much like the Fordist factory once was. It seems strange that Winlow and Hall in their turn to the Italian debates on affective labour chose not to engage with this discussion, given that it has, in so many ways, a direct bearing on their problem and could have provided important material to think against. And could this debate have helped the authors pose a different, or at least a more clearly articulated, alternative to the emerging post-social world they describe? Would a social factory, or a biopolitical regime of production, help us think about the social system beyond the exclusion-inclusion binary in a different way? Could it perhaps help identify different kinds of fault line, moments of subversion and possibilities of appropriation, than the bleak picture that *Rethinking Social Exclusion* leaves us with?

As an intervention in the contemporary theory of poverty Winlow and Hall's work is powerful, despite some of the issues discussed above. Its function as a critical introduction to some key concepts, suitable as supplementary to the more technical literature bound to dominate undergraduate syllabuses, will be appreciated in its own right. The book's attempt to lead a reorientation within the applied social sciences towards a more theoretical debate will however probably be less effective.

While drawing on a wide range of critical theory, *Rethinking Social Exclusion* seems to have problems living up to its promises of redefining the social in a way that enables political interventions that target causes, rather than policies merely addressing effects. Winlow and Hall's work certainly helps to open up a theoretical debate by beginning to rethink social exclusion. This might fuel a productive discussion with important policy implications, but to what degree the book leads to theoretical renewal is more a question of what responses it generates than that it leaves the reader fully satisfied and convinced.

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