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Explaining poverty, social exclusion and inequality: towards a structural approach

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Overview

- This chapter provides an introduction to structural approaches to poverty and inequality.
- It discusses some of the ways in which structural approaches can be applied.
- It outlines and considers how Marxist class analysis approaches the questions of poverty, wealth and inequality.
- It is argued that there is a need for 'upstream' analysis to focus on the activities of the rich.

Key concepts

inequality; poverty; wealth; structural approaches; social polarisation; class; class analysis; upstream analysis

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Introduction

Few would dispute that in the early years of the 21st century much of the thrust of anti-poverty policy in the UK, together with poverty policies developed at a transnational level by the United Nations (UN), the World Bank and other organisations (see Chapter Five, this volume), has at its core a concern to transform people's behaviour – that is, of course, the behaviour of people experiencing poverty, not the rich nor multinational corporations! This both reflects and reproduces the view of 'the poor' as 'other', as beyond 'normal', 'mainstream' society. The ability of powerful groups to generate and present particular representations of people experiencing poverty as, for example, an 'underclass', or as in some way responsible for their own position, is a recurring feature in debates around poverty and its causes and accompanies the growth in poverty and inequality that have characterised the last few decades of the 20th century and early years of the new millennium.

Following from the discussions in Chapters Two and Three, the focus here shifts to the key question of how we should approach the issue of poverty and inequality, why they remain such prevalent features of society today. The main explanations of poverty are distinguishable primarily by whether they offer an individualistic-based analysis or are driven by a more structural understanding of social relations. There are contrasting theories and perspectives within these two broad ways of thinking, but nonetheless the division between individual and structural accounts represents the main fault line that characterises explanations in this field of social scientific study. Arguably, in recent times, at government and policy-making levels, there has been a shift (albeit an uneven and at times tentative one) towards more individualistic and behavioural explanations, for example in many 'underclass' and/or 'cultures' of poverty discourses. In this chapter a structural approach is centred as offering a particularly comprehensive and powerful way of making sense of inequalities in society and of 'social problems' such as poverty.

It is clear from the previous chapters that poverty, wealth and inequality are highly contested areas of study and analysis. That there are multiple and competing definitions, measurements and methodologies surrounding the study of poverty and wealth has long been a feature of social scientific investigations in these fields. Such contestations reflect different political traditions and theoretical controversies, not only about the questions of poverty, wealth and inequality themselves, but of social justice, of equality and, indeed, of how society itself should be organised and structured. Further, and linking directly with the overall themes and concerns of this book, the analysis of poverty and inequality is directly related to and entangled with the study of cross-cutting social divisions and questions of class, gender, ethnicity, 'race' and sexuality. It also connects with other long-term concerns of social policy

analysis with the social relations of welfare, *the who gets what and who gets naught* of welfare provision.

Not surprisingly, then, when we begin to turn our attention to the question of how we should analyse and explain such questions, the explanations that are offered immediately bring into focus more fundamental social and political questions. It is therefore impossible to offer a 'balanced' or 'objective' discussion and from the outset this chapter is explicit in favouring, as it does, a structural explanation of poverty and inequality, underpinned by Marxist class analysis. What is meant by a 'structural' perspective or approach to poverty and inequality? At its most basic structural explanations seek to locate the analysis and explanation of issues from poverty and social exclusion through to inequality, wealth and power in the context of the wider social relations that structure society. Social factors and forces, for instance the organisation of an economy, unemployment, working conditions, educational provision, health, housing, environmental factors and so on, all play significant roles in shaping what the sociologist Max Weber termed 'life chances' (Weber, 1978), the interplay of personal and social factors that shape the opportunities and life that individuals will experience (see also Bendix, 1977, p 2; Hughes et al, 2003, p 107).

Structural approaches are built around the social contexts in which we live and which work to shape our lives in different ways. Most social scientists will argue, many of whom follow Weber's approach, that it is the complex interrelationship between these social contexts and structures and individual agency that shape the lifecourse and the opportunities that may come our way. In the discussion that follows, an introduction to the focus and approach of structural perspectives is outlined and explored.

Introducing structural approaches

One-fifth of humanity lives in countries where many people think nothing of spending \$2 a day on a cappuccino. Another fifth of humanity survive on less than \$1 a day and live in countries where children die for want of a simple anti-mosquito bed net. (UN, 2005, Summary, p 17).

Massive poverty and obscene inequality are such terrible scourges of our times – times in which the world boasts breathtaking advances in science, technology, industry and wealth accumulation – that they have to rank alongside slavery and apartheid as social evils. (Nelson Mandela, quoted in UN, 2005, Summary, p 17)

In the early years of the 21st century we live in a world that is divided and highly unequal as rarely before. In 2005, the 500 richest individuals in the world, the capacity of a large lecture theatre in a UK university today or of an Airbus A380 passenger jet, had a combined income greater than the poorest 416 million people. And 2.5 billion people, around 40% of the world's population, share 5% of global income. By contrast, the richest 10%, the 'super-rich' who live overwhelmingly in the high-income countries, enjoy 54% of the world's income (UN, 2005, Summary, p 18).

On a global scale as well as in UK society, the early years of the 21st century are characterised by massive inequalities in wealth and income, inequalities which have grown enormously since the 1970s. The scale of this inequality is almost beyond comprehension, perhaps not surprisingly as much of it remains hidden from view. How do we understand such inequalities? What issues and questions should be at the core of our explanations? By using the term 'inequality' there is a strong hint as to the direction of our gaze or focus – and to the kinds of explanation that we would wish to offer. Structural approaches of different kinds would share a starting point that there is little that is 'natural' or inevitable about the inequalities that so scar the world today. Instead inequalities are attributed to the unequal social relations between rich and poor. Poverty and wealth, in other words, are related through unequal social and economic relations.

The relationship between poverty and wealth, between rich and poor, is a dynamic one. We can understand that in the 1960s and 1970s in the UK, for instance, the gap between rich and poor narrowed somewhat, although by no means as much as is often argued. We can also find considerable evidence that highlights that since the late 1970s the gulf between rich and poor has increased dramatically (see, for instance, Westergaard, 1995; Walker, 1997). How might a structural approach make sense of this?

Thatcherism and the strategy of inequality

The general story of trends in the distribution of income and wealth in postwar Britain is one in which the gradual trend towards a narrowing of inequality between the late 1940s and 1970s is thrown into sharp reverse in the late 1970s (see Chapter Two, this volume, for data on the distribution of personal assets). Between 1979 and 1993 the richest 10% of the population saw their incomes increase on average by around 63% (Novak, 2001, pp 4–5). But this is only part of the story. Seventy per cent of the population saw their incomes increase by less than average while for the poorest 10% their incomes actually declined in real terms by 16%. In terms of poverty (measured here as less than 50% of average income; see Chapter Three, this volume, for a critical discussion of the measurement of poverty), the numbers living in

poverty increased from 5 million in 1979 to 14 million in 1993/94, from 9% to 25% of the population (Walker, 1997, p 3). Therefore, when we compare the end of the 1970s with the early to mid-1990s, the gap or gulf between rich and poor increased dramatically. This is often referred to by social scientists as 'social polarisation' (see Walker, 1997).

There is considerable evidence to back up the claims made here, but how do we explain this rising inequality? The growth of inequality during the 1980s and 1990s (continuing into the early 2000s) was no accident, no simple unfortunate and unforeseen 'by-product' of longer-term economic change, but for Alan Walker (1990, 1997), part and parcel of what he terms *a strategy of inequality*. Prior to 1979 there was a general political consensus that a key task for government was to address poverty and to try to reduce inequalities. The provision of 'social security', full employment and the expansion of a welfare state were widely (although not universally) supported and reflected to varying degrees in government policy making. All this was to change with the election of the Conservative government in 1979. Instead of a commitment to a broad social democratic agenda, which in any case was under severe threat under the previous Labour administration, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative government embarked on a radically different policy-making project that prioritised different objectives from those of post-Second World War governments.

In place of a concern to tackle poverty and to reduce inequality, 'Thatcherism' celebrated low taxation, the free market, personal freedoms and responsibilities, reductions in state welfare, denationalisation, privatisation and so on. These are key components of what we have subsequently come to term a 'neoliberal' agenda. As Walker argues, 'rather than seeing inequality as potentially damaging to the social fabric, the Thatcher governments saw it as an engine of enterprise, providing incentives for those at the bottom as well as those at the top' (Walker, 1997, p 5).

During the years of Conservative government, between 1979 and 1997, and thereafter under New Labour, an expansive welfare state was viewed as 'a drain' on the economy, undermining national economic competitiveness but also contributing to 'welfare dependency' among people experiencing poverty, undermining incentives to work. The idea that an underclass of unemployed, jobless 'poor people', 'scroungers', were only too willing to take advantage of hard-working taxpayers became a recurring theme of the 1980s and 1990s, with echoes of this still evident today in New Labour's oft-repeated references to the problems of 'worklessness' and the assorted and multiple moral problems created through welfare dependency (see Levitas, 2005). In place of universal benefits there has, as a result, been a shift towards means-tested benefits, more in-work forms of support such as through tax credits and more targeting of benefits towards those most in need. However, it was not only in relation to

welfare spending that the government worked to reshape policy. Reducing, tightening and controlling benefits was accompanied by a new tax regime that was highly regressive, with most taxpayers now paying the same basic rate of taxation. Some capital taxes were abolished while in-work taxation increased along with a hike in National Insurance contributions. The overall effect of this was to shift the tax burden from those with high incomes to those with low incomes. Between 1979 and 1989, for instance, £91,000 million was cut from income taxation, 29% of which went to the top 1% of taxpayers with the bottom 50% receiving only 12% of the cuts (Walker, 1990, pp 41–2).

Reforming the ‘morally damaging’ welfare state, putting responsibility in place of dependency, was only one dimension of Thatcherite social policies, however. There was also a strong commitment to the belief that any form of welfare provision that was non-state generated and managed was necessarily superior to state welfare. This was reflected in a marked shift towards policies that spoke of the role of the family and of community as well as the non-statutory and voluntary sectors in providing welfare. ‘Rolling back the state’ to enable such sectors to ‘flourish’ became an important principle of government policy.

Promoting enterprise and attacking ‘dependency’ were central to this strategy of inequality. State intervention was damaging in that it undermined the former and worked to increase the latter. This represented a sharp break with the policy-making consensus of the post-1945 era, which tended to support the principles of interventionism and egalitarianism. Economic growth, entrepreneurship and enterprise were to replace reducing inequality and tackling poverty as the main objectives of government policy making. By this route, it was argued, in terms that have come to be infamous, that the fruits of economic growth and increasing wealth would ‘trickle down’ to benefit the rest of society, including among people experiencing poverty who, freed from the constraints of ‘dependency’ and ‘generous’ welfare benefits, would feel empowered to take up new jobs that were being created.

There are other dimensions of this strategy of inequality that we are only able to mention in passing here. Rising unemployment in the 1980s, for instance, was also an important element of this strategy, working as it did to reduce wage costs by acting as a brake on wage levels and demands, and this also had the additional effect of eroding the bargaining position of trades unions and their members, which was also under attack from other government policies, and a series of acts which sought to control and reduce the effectiveness of trades unions.

Promoting inequality, therefore, was a central strategy of the Conservatives during the 1980s and 1990s. Inequality and the growth of poverty were viewed as beneficial for society, or at least for the promotion of enterprise and for enhancing economic growth. Walker’s (1990) thesis represents an interesting

example of a structural approach, with the focus of the analysis on governments, policy making and on the interrelationship between poverty and wealth. In turn, poverty is understood in relation to wider social and economic goals, in particular providing the right conditions for profitability and prosperity and national economic growth and competitiveness. In other ways this strategy of inequality has worked to increase inequalities in other areas of social life, and here again we are reminded of the idea of life chances introduced above.

The impact of inequality

What emerges strongly from the discussion thus far is the importance of understanding poverty, wealth and inequalities as social relations. By this we mean that while material resources are central to this, social relations are also economic, political, cultural, geographical, environmental and psychological. Questions of security, insecurity, of risk and uncertainty, vulnerability, harm and well-being, are all fundamentally social and political issues, issues of social justice that go to the heart of what kind of society we would like to live in and how we are going to achieve this. In this regard structural approaches tend to view inequality and poverty not as marginal features of society, some brief aberrations, but long-term social processes and relations that permeate the fabric of society and which are reflected in the way in which society is organised and structured. For Richard Wilkinson, the degree of inequality in the social environment is reflected in society in different ways, including in the levels of trust, involvement in community life, morbidity and mortality, in anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol addiction, anxiety, stress, depression, insecurity and so on (Wilkinson, 2005, p 23). He argues that ‘the quality of social relations in societies is related to the scale of income inequality – how big the gap is between rich and poor’ (2005, p 24). In claiming that there is a close relationship between inequality and the quality of social relations, Wilkinson offers a structural approach that seeks to locate the causes of ‘social problems’, for instance drug addiction or ill-health, as well as problems that are often presented as being more ‘personal’, such as depression and stress, in the unequal relations and structures of society. This approach begins and ends at the social level, locating individuals and groups in their social contexts and understanding supposedly ‘individual’ issues as inextricably linked to the organisation and structure of society.

One of the clearest ways of understanding such connections and relations is to focus on the links between inequality and health. Wilkinson shows that ill-health and premature death are linked to levels of inequality in society with the US performing worse than most other industrialised countries in this respect. Life expectancy in the UK also declined during the last two decades

of the 20th century when, as we have seen, the income gap between rich and poor was also increasing dramatically.

Wilkinson's approach is outlined here to illustrate how a structural account can offer explanations of issues that are all too often regarded as solely individual-centred. His psychosocial emphasis attributes physiological and psychological illnesses to income levels. The more hierarchical a society, the more people experience insecurity about their position within it as well as fears of 'falling' from a particular social position (see Young, 2007). Inequality matters, therefore, in many different direct and indirect ways and works to shape the myriad of day-to-day interactions and social relations in which we are located.

Poverty and inequality are understood in this approach as social relations, yet Wilkinson tends to underplay the role that material factors play in the generation of ill-health. Inequality is much more than a psychosocial state, however, and for some theorists it can only be understood as a dimension of the exploitative and unequal economic and social relations that characterise contemporary capitalist societies.

Class and class analysis: 'an embarrassing and unsettling subject'

Despite the persistence of marked class divisions and structured inequalities across the world today, arguably class has become the social condition that dare not speak its name. The general marginalisation of class in much of the social sciences literature is astonishing. With relatively few exceptions, when class is introduced or mentioned it tends to be as a form of what we might term 'classism', but one of the many discriminations ('-isms') that characterise society. Even where the degree of poverty and deepening inequality is registered, class may be reduced to a descriptive variable, as only one among other equally significant variables in complex systems of stratification, and thereby, in the argument advanced here, minimised as an explanatory concept. As Marxist theorist John Westergaard claimed in 1995, 'class has now been re-declared dead, or dying in all social significance, at a time now when its economic configuration has become even sharper' (Westergaard, 1995, p 114).

Class remains the primary determinant of social life. Intellectually and ideologically, class represented a central point of reference that helped to explain everything from voting patterns and attitudinal differences, political mobilisation, social conflict, to lifestyle and consumption patterns, and even personality traits (see Crompton, 1998; Savage, 2000). Yet, the concept of class no longer occupies centre stage in the analysis of UK society today. Academic, policy and journalistic discourses about modern society have been largely de-classed.

To highlight this eradication of class from the policy lexicon is hardly to make a controversial claim. Class, as Sayer (2005, p 1) put it, has become 'an embarrassing and unsettling subject'. There is something approaching a consensus that class has declined as a significant factor in the routine structuring of social and economic relations in contemporary society. While such claims have been criticised from widely different perspectives (see, for example, Marshall, 1997; Mooney, 2000; Savage, 2000; Ferguson et al., 2002; Skeggs, 2004; Sayer, 2005), they retain significant potency.

In this part of the chapter the main aim is to highlight some of the different ways in which class analysis offers us a powerful and rich form of structural analysis. It makes no apology for arguing that poverty, wealth and inequality are best analysed and explained from the vantage point of Marxist class analysis that seeks to understand these in relation to the structures and organising principles of capitalist society.

Marxist explanations of poverty

Marxism represents the best known of structural explanations of social inequality in capitalist societies. This is not to claim that it is the only structural explanation, but that the entire Marxist tradition is one that readily distinguishes it from all other explanations. In particular, what stands out in Marxist approaches is that the explanation of whatever social issue is taken for investigation always starts from the prioritisation of class and class conflict (see Mooney, 2000). Again constraints of space mean that we are unable to do full justice to the Marxist approach here and instead can only highlight some of the key ways in which Marxists endeavour to analyse and explain poverty and inequality (see also Lavalette, 2006).

As might be expected, the entire thrust of the Marxist approach is to locate the discussion and analysis of poverty within the wider context of class relations and inequalities within capitalist society (see Novak, 1988; Ferguson et al., 2002). In this respect, Marxists make no attempt to isolate people experiencing poverty from the rest of society, but see poverty as part of a relationship of inequality, economically, materially and politically. Thus, poverty is related to inequalities of wealth and income; it cannot be understood outside of the relationship to inequalities of wealth. At the centre of this and underpinning all inequalities is the exploitation and oppressions that are integral to the production of material wealth in capitalist society. For Marxists, the production and accumulation of profit, of wealth, is also simultaneously the production and accumulation of poverty, want and misery. From this position Tony Novak argues that:

It is the economic and social relationships of capitalist society – the division between a minority who own and control the world's

wealth and those who have no choice but to work for them – that is at one and the same time both the root cause of poverty and the motor of capitalist growth and development... Poverty thus needs to be understood not just as the end-product of a particular system of distribution – which is how most studies of poverty approach it – but as an essential precondition for the process of production itself. Poverty is not simply about the way that society's resources are distributed, but also about the way these resources are produced. (1995, p 5)

In making such an argument, a Marxist perspective immediately stands out from the other approaches that seek to define, measure and examine people experiencing poverty in isolation from wider society. They also stand apart from the social exclusion approaches (see Chapter Three) which, while recognising that social exclusion results from wider social processes, ignore the class-based inequalities of capitalist society. Both the social exclusion and Marxist approaches see poverty as a relationship, but they understand and analyse this in very different ways. Through the Marxist approach, poverty is viewed as the product of the normal operations of capitalist society, not an abnormal state of affairs. The threat of poverty is an ever-present fear for many working-class people, although the fact that the overwhelming majority of people experiencing poverty are also working class is something that is generally obscured and overlooked in many accounts. Its study and analysis, therefore, must be located within those very relations by understanding it as a relationship of inequality between a highly powerful and affluent minority and the mass of ordinary workers. Like social exclusion, therefore, Marxist explanations see poverty and inequality as relational, but they offer very different ways of analysing this.

In this respect we need to reflect on the idea of poverty and inequalities as mere 'social problems'. Following the structural approach offered here, poverty and wealth represent very different forms of social problem for people experiencing poverty on the one hand, and for people with high incomes on the other: the task of the latter to maximise income and wealth at the expense of the former; the goal of people experiencing poverty to increase their share of income at the expense of the rich and powerful.

For Marxist theorists, there has been too much concern with counting people experiencing poverty in order to regulate and discipline them and to force them into work (see Jones and Novak, 1999; Gough et al, 2006). This is also accompanied by the recurring representation of people experiencing poverty as a problem to be managed, addressed or, failing that, controlled. Jones and Novak argue that:

punitive and negative images of the poor are deeply sedimented, historically, within British society. These images reflect not only the periodic reconstruction of the poor as morally degenerate and culpable, but also a more widespread, deep-rooted and long-standing antagonism that has characterised social and class relationships in Britain. (Jones and Novak, 1999, p 5)

Therefore we need to be aware that the history of the study of poverty is characterised by a language and approach that has tended to describe 'the poor' often in the most condemning and derogatory of terms. From a concern with the 'dangerous' and disreputable poor in the 19th century (see Mann, 1992; Morris, 1994) through to 'problem families', 'dysfunctional families/communities' and the 'underclass' and 'socially excluded' of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (Macnicol, 1987; Welshman, 2002; Cook, 2006), how we talk about people experiencing poverty says much about our understanding of the underlying causes of poverty and shapes how explanations are then constructed. Labels such as 'underclass', 'hard-to-reach', 'welfare-dependent' (as well as some uses of the notion of 'the socially excluded') are stigmatising and mobilise normative ways of thinking of poverty and inequality that construct 'the poor' and disadvantaged almost as a distinctive group of people living 'on' or 'beyond' the 'margins' of society. In the process this language works to distance 'them' from 'us', the 'mainstream' of society, 'normal', 'hard-working', 'responsible' citizens (see Lister, 2004, chapter 5).

From the 19th century, and reflecting the power of individual-centred explanations, the study and investigation of poverty (and of inequality in general) is highly susceptible to moral condemnation and to blaming people experiencing poverty for their own position. People experiencing poverty are frequently constructed as 'a problem' to be managed and controlled. Poverty itself is often understood and presented as a 'social problem' (although it is not a social problem for everyone). Wealth and the question of 'the rich' are, in stark contrast, rarely viewed in such ways:

what thoughtful rich people call the problem of poverty, thoughtful poor people call with equal justice a problem of riches. (Tawney, 1913, p 10)

In this oft-quoted comment, social critic and historian Richard H Tawney immediately draws our attention to the power relations that underpin wider social and political discourses and explanations of, and approaches to, poverty and inequality, throwing into the melting pot that how we approach the study and analysis of poverty and inequality betrays our values and our politics.

So, the othering of many people experiencing poverty is by no means new development even if it has reached new heights with the Conservative and New Labour over the past two to three decades. Such othering, however, extends to the ways in which the working class and in particular working-class people experiencing poverty are constructed and represented in many social and political discourses today. Jock Young (2007) makes an important distinction between a conservative form of othering, which attributes negative characteristics to the other, and a liberal form of othering, where the other is deemed to lack the qualities, values and virtues that 'we' hold. In this liberal othering, deficits or a lacking are often seen as a consequence of material and cultural factors that prevent others becoming 'just like us'. Young illustrates some of the many ways in which liberal othering works both to *diminish* others – they are less than us – and to *distance* others from us. As Ruth Lister has shown, this is often central to the many discourses that surround the discussion of poverty and of people experiencing poverty in the contemporary UK. For Young (2007) this binary thinking, 'us' and 'them', permeates public thinking and official discourses and is utilised and extended in constructions of other cultures, countries, nationalities and religions. Young rightly argues that such binary thinking is also evident in social sciences discourses and this might be extended to include the othering of the working class, especially of the white working class.

Haylett (2001) and Skeggs (2005) argue that when the working class features in policy making and in social sciences (as well as in journalistic) commentary, it does so primarily as 'a problem to be solved'. Being working class is often constructed as a 'social condition' in desperate need of remedy. Despite the persistence of marked class divisions and structured inequalities within British society today, there is a recurring identification of that part of the working class suffering most from the effects of long-term economic change and of the strategy of inequality as pathological, as beyond the mainstream, in other words as a 'problem'. Such 'problem' groups occupy a highly precarious relationship in relation to the labour market. The most vulnerable sections of the working class frequently become the focus of overlapping pathologisation processes – in relation to social inclusion policies; in debates around educational attainment, in relation to patterns of ill-health and morbidity, and, most publicly, in the mass media, in relation to questions of criminal justice, especially around urban youth crime.

Such otherings can be understood as part of the wider class antagonisms and hatreds that permeate society today. How we approach the questions of poverty, inequality and wealth reflects such antagonisms. The construction of people experiencing poverty as an underclass or dysfunctional group, as a problem, reflects such antagonisms and works both to produce and reproduce what Jones and Novak (1999, p 73) refer to as the 'abuse of the poor'. As John Macnicol

(1997) has forcefully argued, the demonisation of an underclass and of other groups of people experiencing poverty says more about the preoccupations and fears of the rich and powerful and their concerns for a decline in respect for authority and a fragmenting social order. Such discourses carry with them a focus on individual failings or a lacking, sidelining in the process those structural processes that underpin the production and reproduction of poverty and inequality across the world today as in the past. As such they are part and parcel of neoliberalising worldviews that return us time and time again to a focus on the individual (for further detail on individual/behavioural understandings of the causes of poverty, see Alcock, 2006).

Conclusion

This chapter has been primarily concerned to outline some of the key aspects of structural explanations of poverty, wealth and inequality. Structural explanations offer powerful ways of making sense of social issues such as poverty. Against those perspectives, which are largely focused on individual behaviours and 'problem cultures', structural arguments seek to locate the causes of poverty and inequality in the structural organisation of society. These are not approached as some kind of malfunctioning or short-term aberrations in how society is organised. Instead they are made sense of as part of a wider system of oppression, exploitation and inequality that characterises contemporary societies. There is a growing interest among some sections of academic social policy with material inequalities, both at the level of UK society and globally, and how these work to generate and structure disadvantage and poverty. While it is important to maintain a conceptual distinction between poverty and inequality, there is increasing recognition that unless inequality is tackled, then poverty and disadvantage will continue as a pervasive feature of contemporary societies. Inequality matters immensely for our understanding of poverty and social exclusion (see Callinicos, 2000; Jackson and Segal, 2004; Byrne, 2005; Harvey, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005; Orton and Rowlingson, 2007). Through an approach which seeks to centre the unequal social relations of poverty and inequality, we can build a more comprehensive understanding of a wide range of social issues, from ill-health and insecurity through to much more significant concerns with social justice and 'well-being', and to how the wealthy continue to be privileged through economic, social and fiscal policies.

This ties in with growing calls from social policy academics that social policy analysis itself should 'move upstream' (for example, Sinfeld, 2004). Sinfeld argues that there is an urgent need for social policy researchers to study and explain the underlying structural factors that shape poverty, disadvantage and inequality, an approach which focuses more on the 'root causes' of poverty

but which also entails more critical examination of the privileging of the rich through social and economic policies.

Marxism has always offered such an approach. It begins not with poverty, but with the totality of social relations in society, arguing that it is only a totalising explanation that can provide an adequate account of poverty and inequality, relating such issues to questions of class, exploitation and oppression. This has led theorists such as Westergaard (1995) to argue that more emphasis needs to be given to the reproduction of wealth and privilege among the upper class of the rich. Here there is an explicit attack on the preoccupation among politicians, policy makers and in the academy with 'the poor', and we might extend this to include the liberal othering identified by Young.

In many discussions of poverty and of anti-poverty policy, people experiencing poverty exist only as victims or as passive recipients of policies developed by 'us' for 'them'. They are generally denied any sense of 'agency', save attributing to them responsibility for their poverty (see Lister, 2004, pp 124–5). That people experiencing poverty have a 'voice' and can organise to resist attempts to other them as well as to defend the kinds of state services on which they depend has, with some notable exceptions, generally been neglected (cf Priven and Cloward, 1977; Lavalette and Mooney, 2000; Ferguson et al., 2002). As Ruth Lister has argued, there has been a tendency to deny voice and agency to people experiencing poverty, even in some of those structural accounts that dominated UK social policy analysis in the postwar period (Lister, 2004, pp 126–7).

Not all structural approaches are guilty in this respect, however. Let us return to Marxist class theory. This perspective not only recognises and explains that capitalist society is built on and structured around an exploitative set of social relations which work to oppress the overwhelming majority in society, but that working-class people have the capacity, the agency, to resist and to struggle against such exploitations. Poverty and inequality are seen as the inevitable consequence of the exploitative social relations that lie at the heart of capitalist society, not some aberration that can be fully addressed, diluted or managed through social policy alone.

Here is one fruitful way in which we can see that class as structure and class as agency interrelate, and through which the material inequalities that characterise contemporary society can begin to be challenged. What this also reminds us, importantly, is that poverty and inequality are not some naturally occurring or inevitable feature of human society but the product of human relations, that is, of human action and agency. In turn this means that the building of another society is possible in which poverty and inequality are overcome and the pursuit of real social justice becomes the building block of social life.

Summary

- Structural explanations foreground social, economic, political and cultural relations and processes as key factors that generate and reproduce poverty and inequality
- The idea of a strategy of inequality refers in particular here to the policies and objectives of the Conservative governments during the 1980s and 1990s that sought to increase inequality as a way of disciplining labour, growing the economy and affecting a restructuring of the welfare state.
- Marxist explanations of poverty start from the perspective of exploitative class relations and see poverty and inequality as inevitable features of class society.
- The othering of people experiencing poverty and disadvantaged sections of the working classes has long been central to debates over poverty and its causes.
- People experiencing poverty have generally been denied agency or voice although there is now more recognition that this serves to construct 'the poor' as other.
- 'Upstream analysis' means focusing more on the ways in which the rich are privileged through state policies as well as on the behaviour and activities of the rich.

Questions for discussion

- What are the basic starting points of structural explanations?
- In what ways might inequalities in wealth and income shape other inequalities in society?
- Why does Marxist theory see poverty, wealth and inequality as part and parcel of the structure of capitalist society?
- In what ways might it be better to relate structure and agency in explanations of poverty and its causes?
- What do you understand by the term 'moving upstream'? What would be the focus of an upstream analysis of poverty, wealth and inequality?

Further reading

There are many different books, studies and reports which explore different aspects of explaining poverty and some of these have been highlighted by Alcock (see Chapter Three, this volume). Perhaps one of the most accessible overviews is provided by Lister in *Poverty* (2004), while for critical explorations

of the idea of social exclusion, Gough et al's *Spaces of social exclusion* (2006), Levitas's *The inclusive society?* (2005) and Byrne's *Social exclusion* (2005) are among the best discussions available. Each seeks to locate poverty in its social and structural contexts. For the relationship between poverty and wealth, see Novak's (1988) *Poverty and the state*, while one of the best all-round accounts, although it is now a little dated, is Scott's *Poverty and wealth* (1994).

For Marxist explanations of equality and inequality, one of the best and most readable accounts is offered by Callinicos in *Equality* (2000). For a Marxist approach to welfare see Ferguson et al's *Rethinking welfare* (2002). Useful general discussions of class are available in Savage's *Class analysis and transformations* (2000) and Sayer's *The moral significance of class* (2005).

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