Scott, Sam ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5951-4749, Lynch, Kenneth ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5296-2864 and Bennett, Rachel ORCID logoORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5780-8786 (2020) Dropping the china and picking up some of the pieces: Neoliberalism, social vulnerability and 'residual benevolence'. Antipode.

"Dropping the china and picking up some of the pieces: Neoliberalism, social vulnerability and 'residual benevolence'."

Scott, S.[1], Lynch, K., and Bennett, R.

Introduction

Building upon recent research published within Antipode (Blomley, 2020; Gourzis et al., 2019; Heslop and Omerod, 2019; McIlwaine and Bunge, 2019; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020; Yrigoy, 2020) this intervention is interested in social vulnerability at work (through the employment market) and at home (through the housing market) and state-welfare responses to this. Neoliberalism[2] is built upon considerable power asymmetry (Dorling, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) and political-economic structures matter for those interested in understanding social vulnerability and associated exploitation and harm (Pemberton, 2015; Schrecker and Bambra, 2015). Neoliberal states, though, often seek to blame vulnerable individuals and families for their own precarity: a point made clear by Slater (2014) in his description of the "creation of ignorance" via the dominant "Broken Britain" narrative. Indeed, restrictive welfare regimes, in the UK and beyond, have been justified based on such constructions; constructions that amount to the stigmatization of both poor people and deprived neighbourhoods (May et al. 2019; Nayak, 2019). When neoliberal states are not victim blaming they appear inclined to provide (albeit partial) solutions to the social problems they are implicated in. As part of this, they tend to define problems in a residual (and often individualized) way, and, they pick up only some of the pieces. This 'residual benevolence' stems from a "double movement" (Polanyi, 1944) involving the dialectical processes of marketisation, on the one hand, and social protection on the other. It is a double movement, though, that may also be an attempt "to hide the grim realities" of neoliberalism through a strategic "benevolent mask" (Harvey, 2005: 119). Moreover, whilst this benevolence is often championed, it does relatively little to tackle the structural causes of vulnerability and protects only some of those suffering exploitation and harm (hence its residual nature).

Vulnerability at Work

Neoliberalism is linked with the deterioration of working conditions for the lower and, more arguably, middle classes. Herod and Lambert (2016: 2) summarise the situation as follows: "The changes in labour market practice since the late 1970s have been far reaching and revolutionary and, for many, herald a return to the conditions experienced by workers under 19th century industrial capitalism" (see also: Gourzis et al., 2019; Scott, 2017b; Stone and Arthurs, 2013; Weil, 2014). At the same time, it is difficult for individuals to withdraw their labour due to limited welfare safety-nets and what have been called "workfare" states (Hamnett, 2014; Peck, 2001). Not unrelated to this, the UK has been experiencing somewhat of an employment 'boom': record employment and record low unemployment (Partington, 2019). However, the TUC has estimated that there are now 3.2 million vulnerable and

---

[1]   Corresponding author. Address: Geography, School of Natural and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire, FCH Campus, Swindon Road, Cheltenham, GL50 4AZ, UK. Email: sscott@glos.ac.uk

[2]   We recognise in using the term neoliberalism that there is a danger of oversimplification (Barnett, 2005; Brenner et al., 2010) though draw on Harvey (2005) as the basis for using the term in this intervention.

insecure workers in the UK labour market (TUC, 2017)[3] and there has been a prolonged decline in real-wages since the economic crisis of 2008 (Lavery, 2018).

Work can offer health benefits, not only can it be protective against financial stress, but it can also be valuable for identity, social support and having a role and purpose in society (Bartley, 1994, Waddell and Burton, 2006). However recent empirical research has shown that whilst overall employment does offer health advantages relative to unemployment, this health advantage does not hold if employment is only on an insecure basis, finding that the temporary employed have similar levels of health biomarkers to the unemployed (Sumner et al., 2020). Thus, there is a 'boom-bust' phenomenon at work, whereby the labour market is booming but significant numbers of workers are now vulnerable and left relatively exposed and unsupported by the neoliberal state. Some have gone so far as to label vulnerable and insecure workers as a class apart: a "precariat" (Standing, 2011).

In the UK case, the employment vulnerability cemented by neoliberalism has been accompanied by a very strong and concerted attempt by the state to tackle severe forms of labour abuse (i.e. forced labour, human trafficking, modern slavery). A dominant 'modern slavery' agenda (Craig et al., 2019) has emerged in the UK, with the Home Office identifying between 10,000-13,000 victims in 2013 (HM Government, 2017). However, this emergent agenda says little about the exploitation continuum (between modern slavery and decent work) and little of the discrepancy between the 10,000-13,000 victims identified by the Home Office and the 3.2 million insecure and vulnerable workers identified by the TUC. Further, whilst the fight against severe labour abuse is to be welcomed, this fight must not mask the wider problem of worker exploitation and harm (Davies, 2019; Lloyd, 2018; Scott, 2017a, Scott, 2019; Vandergeest and Marschke, 2020). To this end, one should approach the neoliberal state's definition of the problem with caution and see it as a residual one that restricts the size of the problem and more often than not limits the causes of the problem to individual 'bad-egg' employers (rather than, say, large corporations and their supply chains). Moreover, such a residual and individualised (rather than structural) approach to the problem of vulnerable employment is possibly also a "benevolent mask": an important strategic element in the preservation of neoliberalism.

Vulnerability at Home

The UK experience in the housing sector paints a similar 'boom-bust' picture, with exploitation rife (Dorling, 2014; Hoolachan et al., 2017) and considerable profits being generated. Historically, the post-war period saw governments of the time tackle the early 20th century low quality housing stock. In the UK local authorities led housing construction: growing to 150,000 dwellings per annum by 1947, and continuing at between 150,000 to 200,000 per annum from then until the early 1970s (HM Government, 2020). It is estimated that in the 1970s local governments constructed 6.6 million homes, accounting for a third of the country's housing (Shaw, 2019). The late 1970s saw a decline and almost no public sector building by the end of the 1980s. A private construction boom lagged behind the public sector, growing more gradually, but building to a peak of 200,000 dwellings per annum by the mid-1960s, then stabilising at around 120,000 per annum (with peaks above 150,000 in 1987 and 2007, both shortly before economic recessions). The effect of this in the post-war years was

---

[3]   The TUC measures this figure using three components: low paid self-employment; insecure temporary work (agency, casual, seasonal, other); and zero-hours contracts (TUC. 2017: 6). A different TUC calculation in 2007, using mainly Labour Force Survey and Home Office data, put the number of vulnerable workers in the UK at around 2 million (TUC, 2007: 24).

a decrease in private renting, together with an increase in homeownership and an increase in social housing tenancy. However, since the 1980s various policies have begun to change this.

Housing commentators generally agree that subsidising housing is an acceptable and important welfare strategy that underpins the right to shelter, which has complex relationships with other aspects of health and wellbeing (Levy and Sidel, 2009). However, it also represents a high cost to the state and this has been used to justify a reduction in expenditure during times of austerity. In their recent Antipode paper, Heslop and Ormerod (2019) highlight how narratives created by party political policy, the media and think tanks have linked housing supply issues to government involvement and regulation and thus have also been used to justify reducing the role of the state in the housing sector. In the UK since 2010, though building on trends established in the 1980s, governments have pursued policies of austerity, cutting support for social and affordable housing. Goering and Whitehead (2017) compare UK and US housing policies under austerity, recognising public support for social need on the one hand, while on the other identifying gradual cuts to the numbers receiving such support. Dorling (2015) sees this as a deliberate policy of "regressive redistribution". Shaw (2019) and Jones et al. (2019) suggest that austerity has resulted in a "slow violence" as the state commits trauma against people who are vulnerable or in crisis by attacking the social fabric that supports them: "Whenever housing is damaged by austerity, whenever streets are left to ruin, whenever libraries are shut, whenever infrastructure decays, it imparts an indelible wound on the human condition" (Shaw, 2019: 977).

Evidence also suggests that state investment in social housing can provide savings elsewhere. For example, in a paper on supported housing – a form of social housing that provides complementary support for people with high levels of social need (such as those with mental health issues, substance abuse problems and the formerly homeless) – Lynch et al. (2016) highlight the estimated £640 million net annual public savings in 2010 across all client groups, particularly in reducing client need of NHS services. They argue that austerity-based cuts to these services have caused harm to the most vulnerable by cutting the support that ensures their shelter, as part of wider welfare cuts. The result is what is described as 'residualisation', as the social welfare provision retreats to emergency support for those in the most extreme circumstances, a situation found in the social housing of several advanced economies (Lynch et al., 2016; Hobson et al., In Press). Thus, whilst the housing market in the UK (like the labour market) may have been experiencing a 'boom' over recent years, this appears to have come at a cost with support for vulnerable residents ebbing away.[4]

Conclusions

The vulnerable (whether at work or at home) have been left exposed by neoliberalism and, whilst some may profit from this, it is important that underpinning power asymmetries, and exploitative practices and harmful outcomes, are identified and critically examined. That the world is unequal and unjust is hardly a novel observation however, nor is the fact that neoliberalism has contributed to this (Ferguson, 2010). What is novel is the way in which states, arguably with a blend of altruism and strategic self-interest, seek to take ownership of the problems they help to create by defining and solving them in certain ways. Using the examples of booming employment and housing markets in the UK we have sought to show just how limited neoliberal states can be in terms of defining and tackling social vulnerability and associated exploitation and harm. The scale of vulnerability appears quite extensive even

---

[4] In times of housing downturns, banks and hedge funds deploy dispossession as a coping strategy: effectively passing risk onto dispossessed homeowners (Yrigoy, 2019).

when employment and housing markets are ostensibly buoyant. However, states tend to narrowly construct the problem of social vulnerability, so that the number of people deserving of intervention is minimised. In addition, the causes of vulnerability are rarely linked to factors that challenge existing power asymmetries and exploitative and harmful practices: indeed victim-blaming is actually quite common. On top of this, the neoliberal state still underlines its role as protector, a benevolence that may be part of a strategy of self-preservation (a mask) as much a genuinely altruistic double movement. The question that leads on from this rather critical analysis is: can states do anything more than pick up some of the pieces when it comes to protecting the vulnerable from exploitation and harm? Is residual benevolence as much as we can hope for? If we are to be more ambitious, we need to think about how states can minimise the scale of vulnerability, and have fewer pieces to pick up in the first place. The evidence here points to a more optimistic conclusion than one might expect, in that the political-economy, and associated welfare regimes, seem to matter; and we do see differences in levels of vulnerability, exploitation and harm over time and space.

References

Barnett, C. (2005). The consolations of 'neoliberalism'. Geoforum, 36 (1), 7-12.

Bartley, M., (1994) Unemployment and ill health: understanding the relationship. Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, 48(4), pp.333-337.

Blomley, N. (2020). Precarious Territory: Property Law, Housing, and the Socio-Spatial Order. Antipode, 52(1), 36-57.

Brenner, N., Peck, J., & Theodore, N. (2010). Variegated neoliberalization: geographies, modalities, pathways. Global Networks, 10 (2), 182-222.

Craig, G., (et al.) (Eds.) (2019). The modern slavery agenda: Policy, politics and practice. Policy Press: London.

Davies, J. (2019). From severe to routine labour exploitation: The case of migrant workers in the UK food industry. Criminology & Criminal Justice, 19(3), 294-310.

Dorling, D. (2010) Injustice: Why social inequality still persists. Policy Press: London.

Dorling, D. (2014). All that is solid: How the great housing disaster defines our times, and what we can do about it. Penguin: London.

Dorling, D. (2015) Policy, politics, health and housing in the UK. Policy & Politics 43 (2) 163-80.

Ferguson, J. (2010). The uses of neoliberalism. Antipode, 41 , 166-184.

Goering, J., & Whitehead, C. M. (2017). Fiscal austerity and rental housing policy in the United States and United Kingdom, 2010–2016. Housing Policy Debate, 27(6), 875-896.

Gourzis, K., Herod, A., & Gialis, S. (2019). Linking Gentrification and Labour Market Precarity in the Contemporary City: A Framework for Analysis. Antipode, 51(5), 1436-1455.

Hamnett, C. (2014) Shrinking the welfare state: the structure, geography and impact of British government benefit cuts. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 39(4), 490-503.

Harvey, D (2005) A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: OUP.

HM Government (2017) 2017 UK Annual Report on Modern Slavery. HM Government: London.

HM Government (2020) Live tables on house building: new build dwellings. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-house-building [accessed 7/1/20]

Herod, A., & Lambert, R. (2016). Neoliberalism, precarious work and remaking the geography of global capitalism. In Neoliberal Capitalism and Precarious Work. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Heslop, J., & Ormerod, E. (2019). The Politics of Crisis: Deconstructing the Dominant Narratives of the Housing Crisis. Antipode, 52(1), 145-163.

Hoolachan, J., McKee, K., Moore, T., & Soaita, A. M. (2017). 'Generation rent' and the ability to 'settle down': economic and geographical variation in young people's housing transitions. Journal of Youth Studies, 20(1), 63-78.

Hobson, J., Lynch, K. and Lodge, A. (In Press) Residualisation in supported housing: an organisational case study. Housing, Care and Support.

Jones, D., Lowe, P. and West, K. (2019) Austerity in a disadvantaged West Midlands neighbourhood: Everyday experiences of families and family support professionals. Critical Social Policy. Online First: https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018319840923

Lavery, S. (2018). The legitimation of post-crisis capitalism in the United Kingdom: real wage decline, finance-led growth and the state. New political economy, 23(1), 27-45.

Levy, B. S. & Sidel, V. W. (2009) Editorial: The Economic Crisis and Public Health. Social Medicine 4(2), 82-87.

Lloyd, A. (2018). The harms of work: An ultra-realist account of the service economy. Policy Press: Bristol.

Lynch, K., Hobson, J. and Dooley, P. (2016) Supported housing in Global Austerity: Local Providers Fears for the Future in Gloucestershire, England. Land Use Policy, 59. pp. 589--601.

May, J., Williams, A., Cloke, P. and Cherry, L. (2019), Welfare Convergence, Bureaucracy, and Moral Distancing at the Food Bank. Antipode, 51: 1251-1275.

McIlwaine, C., & Bunge, D. (2019). Onward precarity, mobility, and migration among Latin Americans in London. Antipode, 51(2), 601-619.

Nayak, A. (2019), Re-scripting Place: Managing Social Class Stigma in a Former Steel-Making Region. Antipode, 51: 927-948.

Partington (2019) UK unemployment falls to 44y low despite Brexit fears. The Guardian, Tuesday 19th March 2019. [Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/mar/19/uk-unemployment-falls-brexit-jobless-rate]

Peck, J. (2001) Workfare States. Guilford Press: New York.

Pemberton, S. (2015) Harmful Societies: Understanding Social Harm. Policy Press: Bristol.

Polany, K. (1944) The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time. Beacon Press: Boston.

Schrecker, T. and Bambra, C. (2015) How politics makes us sick: Neoliberal epidemics. Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke.

Scott, S. (2017a). Labour exploitation and work-based harm. Policy Press: Bristol.

Scott, S. (2017b). Informalisation in Low-wage Labour Markets: a Case Study of the UK Food Industry. Population, Space and Place, 23(7).

Scott, S. (2019) Protecting Workers from Exploitation in Neoliberal States: A Social Harm Perspective. Justice, Power and Resistance 3.1: 6-36.

Shaw, I. G. (2019). Worlding austerity: The spatial violence of poverty. Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, 37(6), 971-989.

Slater, T. (2014), The Myth of "Broken Britain": Welfare Reform and the Production of Ignorance. Antipode, 46: 948-969.

Standing, G. (2011) The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class. Bloomsbury: London.

Stone, K. V., & Arthurs, H. (2013). Rethinking workplace regulation: Beyond the standard contract of employment. Russell Sage Foundation.

Sumner, R.C., Bennett, R., Creaven, A.M. and Gallagher, S., (2020) Unemployment, employment precarity, and inflammation. Brain, Behavior, and Immunity 83. pp. 303-308.

TUC (2007) Hard Work, Hidden Lives. The Full Report of the Commission on Vulnerable Employment. TUC: London.

TUC (2017) Living on the Edge. TUC: London.

Vandergeest, P., & Marschke, M. (2020). Modern slavery and freedom: Exploring contradictions through labour scandals in the Thai fisheries. Antipode, 52(1), 291-315.

Waddell, G. and Burton, K. (2006) Is work good for your health and well-being? The Stationary Office: London, UK. Available: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/is-work-good-for-your-health-and-well-being

Weil, D. (2014). The fissured workplace. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone. Penguin: London.

Yrigoy, I. (2020). The Role of Regulations in the Spanish Housing Dispossession Crisis: Towards Dispossession by Regulations?. Antipode, 52(1), 316-336.