



## In-work poverty in consumer culture: a contradiction of our times?

Joelle Donaldson

In recent years, many theorists (Bauman 2005, Fisher 2008, Fukuyama 1992) have acknowledged a marked shift in social structures across the globe. New trends in late modernity have demanded fresh tools of understanding to keep pace with the late/post-modern world. The purpose of this critical reflection is to demonstrate and apply several of these relatively new interpretations of the social world to a current and specific social phenomenon. I hope to do this by arguing that for poor, low-skill service workers in Britain today conditions are rapidly declining, seemingly reverting or regressing us back to the days of liberal capitalism. I will use concepts such as post-Fordism, risk, consumerism and surveillance to explain how and why this might be occurring.

In post-war Britain the economy was organised tightly around a “producer” status, that is to say, the majority of Britain’s GDP between 1945 and 1975 was generated through the production and trade of goods (Tregenna, 2009). However, during this time, as nations like Germany and the United States began to catch up, others would outpace the UK in economic/productive clout. Thus, a new approach was taken which began to

transform society. In the aftermath of WWII a growing number of economists such as Milton Friedman and Frederick von Hayek suggested that nation-states were incapable of avoiding conflict due to the popularity of restrictive, protectionist economic policies such as tariffs (Klein, 2007).

Such policies were designed to protect local industries, but economists like Friedman argued that they deterred international co-operation and inevitably lead to violent struggles for resources (upon which all industrial societies are dependent). The solution to this was proposed to be the abolition of the tight trade rules of the past, and some economists believed that free societies

went hand in hand with free markets.

However, overlooked by these theorists was what happens to society when the flow of capital is deregulated.



Nevertheless, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the UK implemented “neoliberal” economic principles pursuing efficiency above all other considerations (Bauman,

2005; Klein, 2007). For the UK this meant unravelling decades of policy designed to keep its industries in ship-building, steel forging and coal mining afloat – despite its global significance being derived from mass production (and Empire).

The “neoliberal” strategy demanded that all services in which Britain was no longer competitive be dropped in favour of providing specialist services. Today, the UK hosts an average economy by European standards but boasts high levels of foreign investment

per capita with London being the second largest financial center in the world after New York (Allen, 2018).

Economic deregulation does produce wealth (Bauman, 2005; Klein 2007), however, the vast majority of workers who previously were engaged by institutions of mass production were steadily made redundant, not just occupationally but culturally as well.

In ‘Work, Consumerism and the New Poor’, Bauman (2005) explains that industrial producer societies needed to generate obedient workers through culture. This involved the cultivation and internalisation of rigid norms and rules – an example of this necessity to control large numbers of people would be the roles of gender assigned to men and women during capitalism’s “Golden Age”.

That culture was certainly one of order and each person had a fairly static label and place. It was structured in such a way to undergird the primary objectives of UK society during that period, and to

incorporate the bodies of men and women into a system of production via processes of socialisation and conditioning. Bauman (2005) and others observe that economic re-structuring of the 1980s facilitated a cultural revolution. This transformation has seen “roles” in society change from being part of a system of workers and their carers to being engaged primarily as “consumers” by society. The Fordist era of capitalism necessitated limits on behavioural choice; by contrast post-Fordist, global consumer capitalism thrives on the expansion of choice and the constant offer of new things to choose.

A quick example of these differing cultural structures can be found in music; in the 1950s the emergence of rock and roll music in the West was met with heavy cultural resistance for its breaking of the socially conservative norms of previous decades. Today, music which breaks from hegemonic norms is no longer met with such fierce resistance and its value is judged not based on its coherence with traditional Christian ideals but upon its capacity for mass or niche consumption – unsurprisingly as the US and UK deindustrialised moral campaigns against rock and roll music became less frequent and intense (Mephistopheles, 2018).

For the traditional working class, this means that UK as a state is no longer aligned with, nor responsible for, protecting the rights and wellbeing of its low-skill workers so long as enough members are able to function in their capacity as consumers.

The rise of low-skilled service roles and their vast heterogeneity have been steadily riding the wave of economic deregulation for some time now (Bunting,



2005). Generally, these jobs involve significantly less physical risk than manual jobs of the past. However, low wages often create a sense of insecurity (Sennett, 1998).

Furthermore, the individualising tendency of consumer culture (Bauman, 2005) - derived from making constant personal judgements from the act of choosing itself - means that individuals often believe themselves to be at fault. In consumer culture being unsuccessful as a consumer is synonymous with being morally flawed (ref?). Mutated conceptions of the self are common-place and the evidence is arguably reflected by the poor mental health statistics of the deindustrialised world (Boden, 2005; Moore, 2018). Economic efficiency in real terms often contradicts the interests and desires of workers regarding the quality of jobs and their availability. If the UK keeps excluding large swathes of its workers from secure routes of capital, the pursuit of economic efficiency (via the introduction of competitive markets, mechanisation and the roll-back of worker's rights), will create cracks in the foundations of British society, poisoning the UK for a social catastrophe.

Despite being the 5<sup>th</sup> wealthiest nation in the world, the UK has repeatedly been warned by the international community for its apparently self-inflicted poverty levels (JRF, 2018; see also, Bauman 2005; Booth, 2019; Booth and Butler, 2019). In a recent report Philip Alston, the UN rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, described the situation in Britain as 'not just a disgrace, but a social calamity

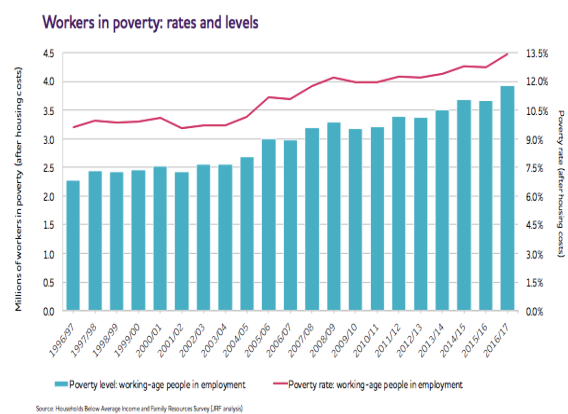


and an economic disaster' (Philip Alston, 2018: 1).

Contemporary social theorists (Bauman, 2005; Beck, 2005; Sennett and Cobb, 1977) would argue that the British state's apparent break from any concern for low-income groups comes from the changing objectives of British society itself. The shifting focus from "producer" to "consumer" interests has coincided with the re-purposing of a central pillar of the Fordist ideological system: the work ethic.

The notion of the work ethic remains significant in the collective consciousness (Bunting, 2005): it originally served to cultivate the individual desire to produce for a society, in return for wages (Bauman, 2005). Today, the notion, according to Bauman, serves as the psychological mediator/justifier for the paradoxical situation many of Britain's poor now find themselves in, that is, in employment but struggling. Although employment levels in Britain are high (Barnard, 2018), an alarming number (be precise – insert stats) of working families are living in a state of poverty.

For the first time in British history those living in poverty are more likely to also be part of a working family.



(Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2018, p.33)

In contemporary consumer societies what constitutes as a “normal” or “desirable” life is a proficiency in consumption. Low wage service workers often find themselves in the precarious circumstance of providing what they themselves can not afford to have. What Sennett and Cobb term as ‘badges of ability’ (1977) are used to distribute value judgements in the same fashion that one’s occupation used to signify class.

The increasing use of consumptive patterns as markers of identity results in a culture of understanding socioeconomic circumstances as, with everything else a personal choice. Self-blame is widespread in contemporary Britain despite the structural odds which face workers across the spectrum. Low self-worth combined with low wages, high living costs (Partington, 2019) and a government that consistently chooses to protect business over workers has led to a tremendous rise in mental illness (Bunting, 2005; Hackman, 2015; Moore, 2019).

These economic and cultural changes call into question how far low-income welfare has progressed or regressed in capitalism’s new age. For the UK they have meant a strong economy and stronger international relevance than would otherwise be expected. However, the human cost of efficiency has been quite high, if exponential economic growth – already doing irreversible damage to the Earth’s biosphere – continues as it has been, will we not see the human cost rise exponentially as well?

In this critical reflection I wanted to draw attention to the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the working poor as I feel that the growth of this group should alarm us. I did this by linking various theorists to the changing nature of British life and used data to prove that conditions are

worsening for the poor. Against the backdrop of an economically successful country, I feel that the consumer culture which supports the UK as it is today has a lot to answer for and would like to see more exploration of this phenomenon.

### **Bibliography:**

Alston, Philip (2018). **Statement on Visit to the United Kingdom, by Professor Philip Alston**, United Nations.

Allen, Kate (2018). ‘UK finance industry dominates European scene’, **Financial Times** [Online] Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/88cdec40-b03c-11e8-8d14-6f049d06439c>> [Accessed 19 December 2019]

Bauman, Zygmunt (2005). **Work, Consumerism and the New Poor**, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cornwall: Open University Press

Boden, Deirdre (2005) ‘Information, Instantaneity and Global Futures Trading

’ in: Adam, Barbara, Beck, Ulrich And Loon, Joost van (eds) **The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory**. London. Sage.

Booth, Robert (2019). ‘UN poverty expert hits back over UK ministers’ ‘denial of facts’, **The Guardian** [Online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/may/24/un-poverty-expert-hits-back-over-uk-ministers-denial-of-facts-philip-alston>> [Accessed 18 December 2019]

Booth, Robert and Butler, Patrick (2019). ‘UK austerity has inflicted ‘great misery’ on citizens, UN says’ **The Guardian** [Online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/16/uk-austerity-has-inflicted-great-misery-on-citizens-un-says>> [Accessed 18 December 2019]



Bunting, Madeleine (2005). **Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives**, London: Harper Perennial.

Hackman, Rose (2015). 'Women are just better at this stuff: is emotional labor feminism's next frontier?', **The Guardian** [Online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/08/women-gender-roles-sexism-emotional-labor-feminism>> [Accessed 18 December 2019]

Mephistopheles, Darya (2018). 'Rock'n'Roll Vs The World: The Stigma of Rock Music' **Miss Mephistopheles** [Online] Available at:<<https://missmephistopheles.com/2018/04/27/rock-n-roll-vs-the-world-the-stigma-of-rock-music/>>

Fisher, Mark (2009). **Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?**, Hampshire: John Hunt Publishing

Fukuyama, Francis (1992). **The End of History and the Last Man**, New York: The Free Press

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018). **UK Poverty 2018** [Dataset] Available from: <[file:///C:/Users/home/Downloads/web\\_jrf\\_uk\\_poverty\\_2018.pdf](file:///C:/Users/home/Downloads/web_jrf_uk_poverty_2018.pdf)> [Accessed 18 December 2019]

Klein, Naomi (2007). **The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism**. New York: Metropolitan Books

Moore, Susanne (2019). 'We are in the midst of a mental health crisis – advice about jogging and self-care is not enough', **The Guardian** [Online] Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/07/we-are-in-the-midst-of-a-mental-health-crisis-advice-about-jogging-and-self-care-is-not-enough>> [Accessed 19 December 2019]

Partington, Richard (2019). 'Living costs rising faster for UK's poorest families than richest', **The Guardian** [Online] Available at: < <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/25/living-costs-rising-faster-for-uks-poorest-families-than-richest>> [Accessed 19 December 2019]

Sennett, Richard (1998). **The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism**. London: W.W. Norton and Company

Sennett, Richard and Cobb, Jonathan (1977). **The Hidden Injuries of Class**. Cambridge: Open University Press

Tregenna, Fiona (2009). 'Characterising Deindustrialisation: An Analysis of Changes in Manufacturing Employment and Output Internationally'. **Cambridge Journal of Economics**, 33, pp. 433-466.

#### Pictures:

<https://foto.wuestenigel.com/wp-content/uploads/api/workers-protest-over-poor-working-conditions.jpeg>  
[https://www.open.edu/openlearn/sites/www.open.edu.openlearn/files/styles/ole\\_ng\\_content\\_style\\_at/public/ole\\_images/general%20images/poverty/poverty.jpg?itok=K5S8jUpQ](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/sites/www.open.edu.openlearn/files/styles/ole_ng_content_style_at/public/ole_images/general%20images/poverty/poverty.jpg?itok=K5S8jUpQ)  
<https://www.ecosia.org/images?q=work+and+poverty+uk&license=modifyCommercially#id=0A664D3EBBF9CF807887EF7BB7A3CD7752CC458D>