

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Imogen Tyler, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*, London: Zed Books, 2013. ISBN: 9781848138513 (paper); ISBN: 9781848138520 (cloth); ISBN: 9781848138544 (ebook)

I began the task of reviewing this remarkable book with a tangled sense of admiration for, on the one hand, the amazing political urgency and eloquence of sociologist Imogen Tyler's writing, and on the other, the epic nature of the research endeavour that led to the publication of *Revolting Subjects*. Well over a decade of intense theoretical scrutiny, empirical grafting and pedagogical commitment provides the backbone for a book that takes the reader on a white-knuckle ride through the disturbing landscape of neoliberal Britain, exposing and analysing the dismal politics of disgust and the myriad representational forms that have made it possible for an unbearably self-satisfied ruling class to convince a jaded electorate that the country is 'broken' not because of three decades of state-sanctioned free-market fanaticism, but rather because of the existence and behaviour of various categories of poor citizens. This book is a tough read for tough times, but a very rare example of a publication that accomplishes both an intellectual achievement of the highest order *and* a hopeful political offering of great significance to ongoing (class) struggles over representation, land and citizenship. Early on, Tyler draws inspiration from the words of Wendy Brown (2005) in insisting upon a form of political engagement that is helpful in "keeping the times from closing in on us", and hopes that her book makes "a small contribution to the development of a new political imaginary for these revolting times" (p.18). *Revolting Subjects* makes much, much more than a small contribution.

'Disgust', as Tyler recognises, is a strong word signifying an "urgent, guttural and aversive emotion" (p.21). A scene-setting introduction, offering a taster of the numerous theoretical influences informing a book structured logically and carefully, leads us into a compelling opening chapter that thoroughly dissects 'disgust' in order to elaborate Tyler's

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

conceptual paradigm for the book: social abjection. She is quite clear that her account is a *revision* of an existing conceptual paradigm of abjection that, for all its analytic merits, does not do the political work it could and should do. Therein lies the normative pulse of the book, which stems from its wonderfully mischievous intent to explore how the technologies of neoliberalism might be reversed – how the revulsion of the state towards those at the bottom of the class structure could be directed back towards the state in respect of *being revolted by* its grotesque daily practices of condemnation and disenfranchisement. This requires viewing social abjection as both mode of governmentality *and* psychosocial theory of subjects and states, and to do so the author moves via the foundational work of Georges Bataille and Mary Douglas to a respectful yet robust critique of Julia Kristeva’s body of (psychoanalytic) work on abjection, drawing on feminist and postcolonial theory by way of, among others, Frantz Fanon, Judith Butler and Gayatri Spivak. These are, of course, major thinkers with influential ideas, and to weave them together without losing clarity of political purpose is no easy task. This is achieved, however, by way of a highly informative chapter conclusion which takes a cue from the excellent work of Alison Mountz to consider the state not as a lumbering, bureaucratic apparatus but as a political process in motion, interpretable in its day-to-day interactions with and treatment of its marginalised citizens especially.

Chapter 2, ‘The Abject Politics of British Citizenship’, is a searing critique of the ways in which certain despised migrant categories from former British colonies can be made “stateless within the state”, and how this is no policy accident but a deliberate strategy of statecraft; citizenship in neoliberal Britain, it is argued, is increasingly circumscribed by and dependent upon the production of abject figures. Such a strong argument requires careful historicisation of the relations between states, citizens and territories, which is undertaken through an analysis of the 1981 Nationality Act, a piece of legislation from the Thatcher years that was less about its stated intent of ‘defining citizenship’ and more an attempt at racial domination via the establishment of essentialist and exclusionary categories of national

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

origin. The lasting impact of this Act is captured by the author in the distressing case of an interviewee, Sonia, who in 2006 became a ‘failed citizen’ when her application for asylum was rejected and, when heavily pregnant and escaping sexual violence and an arranged marriage, was arrested and detained when trying to leave the UK with a false passport. Tyler interviewed Sonia in 2009 and relays not only the crushing material deprivation she was enduring, but also the consequences of being both cast out and outcast within the overall paradox of migrant social abjection:

“Sonia has been constituted as ‘illegal’, somebody with no right to reside or remain in Britain. She cannot escape Britain, she tried and failed, but she is also deprived of access to the resources which human beings require to make a liveable life within the state. Sonia is excluded from British citizenship, its rights and protections, but, paradoxically, remains under the direct and suffocating control of the state; her everyday life is saturated with state power” (p.68).

In the UK, the almost unimaginable situations of people in Sonia’s position have been aggravated over the last two decades by a steadily accelerating political and right-wing media chorus of condemnation of so-called ‘asylum seekers’ (especially ‘bogus’ ones), a catch-all moniker for refugees that has become inscribed into law, and which led to a series of punitive measures relying on the activation of the pervasive myth that Britain has been too generous in opening up its borders to an impending apocalyptic ‘invasion’ of foreign nationals. I was captivated by the sections of Chapter 3 entitled ‘The fabrication of the asylum seeker’ and ‘Media theatrics’, in which Tyler traces the symbolic denigration and criminalisation of those fleeing economic redundancy and/or and political violence, and then situates this within a political-economic register by focusing on how such condemnation carved a path for the growth of an immensely profitable industry of asylum determination, detention and deportation. Just as captivating was the way in which the author gave equal attention to

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

migrant and refugee activism in the context of such an oppressive political structure, finding openings in not just individual acts of resistance but in the collective reactions to them, which destabilise fixed notions of inclusion and exclusion and expose the vested interests behind migration policy.

The pivotal theme of protest is the focus of Chapter 4, 'Naked Protest', where three apparently separate events are interweaved elaborately in response to Silvia Federici's call for a 'feminist commons'. A varied panoply of research methods and sources allowed Tyler to analyse the cases of naked protests by a group of mothers at Yarl's Wood immigration removal centre in England in 2008; by indigenous mothers against global oil corporations in the Niger Delta in 2005; and by feminist activists of the CodePink Houston movement's 'Expose the Naked Truth' protest against the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. What unites these events is not only the neoliberal abjection of the women participating in them, but the radical praxis of opposition: maternal politics emerged from the capitalist destruction of life, from the assertion of our common roots via maternal origin ("We are all born", as Tyler captures it so simply and effectively on p.122), and from the possibilities of a life-centred imaginary that shatters illusions of human progress under patriarchal systems of capitalist exploitation.

The next three chapters of *Revoltin' Subjects* are all focused on social abjection in the UK, and offer riveting, absolutely arresting accounts of, respectively, the subjugation of Gypsies and Travellers; the invention of the 'chav' as the latest semantic battering ram in the denigration of the British working class; and the ways in which the 'underclass' category was invoked to 'explain' the August 2011 riots in urban England. Tyler's account of the infamous Dale Farm eviction of 2011, when the approximately 500 residents of the largest Gypsy and Traveller site in Europe were subject to a scarcely believable forced eviction, is an analysis sensitive to the intersections between land rights, stigmatizing campaigns and political technologies (as evidenced in David Cameron's philanthropic fantasy of a 'Big Society' - a

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

project which, by triumphantly handing power to local groups and communities, actually enabled this forced eviction to occur). Unsatisfied with an approach that would simply report on a miserable and violent episode in British planning history, the author closes this chapter in thoughtful dialogue with political movements that emerged in solidarity with the residents of Dale Farm, and considers their actions in light of important interventions against ‘Left melancholia’ by Paul Gilroy and Jacques Ranciere (the latter’s argument that politics is about creating ‘dissensus’ within the hegemonic perceptual and aesthetic field being particularly instructive and pertinent to Tyler’s intellectual project). The chapter that follows in part refines and extends earlier arguments Tyler made in a blistering paper published in *Feminist Media Studies* in 2008, entitled ‘Chav Mum, Chav Scum’, and offers the most convincing critique I have yet seen of the ludicrous thesis - popular among mainstream British sociologists - that ‘class is dead’. Alert to the ways in which areas of council housing have become stigmatized as urban hellholes where the ‘problem’ categories of society collect and fester - and how that stigma becomes activated for political capital - Tyler’s astonishing interrogation of the production and utilisation of the ‘chav’ label, and the damage that it does, sets the scene for what I take to be the signal political argument of *Revolting Subjects* - that “class struggle is struggle against classification” (p.173). This requires some elaboration.

In the UK, Owen Jones’ (2011) book *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* became a bestseller and catapulted Jones to the position of the go-to ‘view from the Left’ among newspaper editors and current affairs television producers. Tyler applauds Jones’ attempt to expose practices of stigmatization and to shift the terms of the debate, but is troubled by his methodology that “relies upon exposing a mismatch between the ‘unreality’ of vilifying class names and ‘reality’ of working-class dignity” (p.170). For Tyler, this approach is open to political abuse and leaves unquestioned the ways in the ‘chav’ has become:

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

“a figure through which ideological beliefs (the underclass), economic interests (the erosion of the welfare state) and a series of governmental technologies (media, politics, policy, law) converge to mystify neoliberal governmentality by naturalizing poverty in ways that legitimize the social abjection of the most socially and economically disadvantaged citizens within the state” (p.170-171).

This critique in place, Tyler proceeds to draw on both Ranciere (especially *The Philosopher and His Poor* [2004]) and Bev Skeggs (*Formations of Class and Gender* [1997]) to consider practices of “class naming”, and then she brings in Raymond Williams’ arguments (from *Culture and Society* [1983]) on the fabrication of ‘the masses’ to consider class as a *history of names*, where the task for the analyst is to consider how class names have colonised contemporary thinking on poverty and inequality. Such analytical work, as Tyler demonstrates in this book, is valuable to any mobilization against classification, for a new and invigorated vocabulary of class struggle. This wholly absorbing argument in place, Chapter 7, ‘The Kids are Revolting’, exposes the insidious work of the ‘underclass’ trope in respect of how the August 2011 riots in England were reported, and argues that blasting apart this particularly loathsome classification in a nascent politics of dissensus is absolutely crucial to a broader effort to contest divisive neoliberal ideology.

The book concludes with a short ‘Afterword’ where the recent protests of disability activists in the UK (in light of the privatization of welfare that began to gather steam at precisely the same time as the London 2012 Paralympic Games) are contextualised by way of an appropriately optimistic, and indeed rousing, finale. Tyler argues that stigmatization “operates as a form of governance which legitimizes the reproduction and entrenchment of inequalities and injustices which impact on us all” (p.212), and the task is to engage with, understand and support the emergence of “declassificatory politics”, where those who are considered and in some way labelled as revolting “attempt to reconstitute themselves not only as citizens with rights, but as *subjects of value*” (p.214). A delightful and uplifting final

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

passage reveals that *Revolting Subjects* was written, in part, “as a backlash against some of the current forms of ‘post-ideological’ scholarship” (p.215). This is, quite simply, a book on class struggle published in an intellectual context, no, in a *country* very squeamish about it. “Concepts”, Ludwig Wittgenstein once remarked, “*may* alleviate mischief or they may make it worse; foster it or check it” (1977: 55). In respect of class struggle, the concept of social abjection can foster all sorts of encouraging mischief; as Tyler argues, “it has the capacity to trouble the symbolic and material forms of violence it describes” (p.47).

I have no wish to offer any substantive critique of this extraordinary work – to do so would be dishonest and politically counterproductive. I do wish the author hadn’t referred regularly to her case studies of social abjection as “political parables” – for me such language served to trivialise a series of tour-de-force analytical indictments of neoliberal Britain written by a deeply committed scholar of social class. I was at times frustrated that the piercing insights of Pierre Bourdieu in respect of his concepts of symbolic power and symbolic violence were not brought to bear on what is at heart a study of “the power to constitute the given by enunciating it, to make people see and believe, to confirm or transform the vision of the world, and thereby action upon the world, and thus the world itself” (Bourdieu 1991: 170). Through their activities of official classification and categorization, states (via public policies) contribute to producing particular ‘realities’, and this has significant implications for the people living at the bottom of the class structure. To take the words of Javier Auyero, “[s]tates ‘state’ with words, signs and resources and they do so through concrete social relations and the establishment of rituals, routines and institutions that ‘work in us’” (2012: 5). Such Bourdieusian scholarship has delivered significant insights into the state as a powerful site of symbolic and cultural production – so has Imogen Tyler, and occasionally I felt that there was an opportunity to sharpen her already powerful arguments in dialogue with (usually ethnographic) work that reminds us that neoliberalism at the bottom is not about a ‘retreating’ or ‘laissez-faire’ state, but a fiercely bossy,

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

interventionist and punitive one. Also, in Chapter 6, I saw scope to engage more fully with recent scholarship on *territorial stigmatization* – how people are discredited and devalued because of the *places* with which they are associated, especially as the manner in which particular places are portrayed by journalists, politicians and think-tanks has become critically important to a debate about their future. The denigration of place is becoming more and more crucial to state strategies of abjection, as much recent work has elaborated – perhaps this is a future research project. These comments, however, are just minor quibbles and must not take any shine off *Revolting Subjects*, and how important this book is for interpreting the nature of our historical moment.

Finally, as this is a geography journal, some brief closing thoughts in respect of the epistemological, methodological and especially *political* lessons this book offers for human geographers. For well over a decade now, many geographers in the UK especially have become enamoured with ‘nonrepresentational theory’, an ungainly grab-bag of theoretical perspectives that crystallize around the (usually opaquely expressed) notion that the study of human and non-human practices and performances over the study of representational forms can get us somewhere politically, even as it totally disregards the political thrust of some of its supposed influences (e.g. Benjamin, Goffman, Deleuze, Bourdieu), and even as its leading proponents become servants to its central concepts (affect, event, *etc.*) that are ascribed agency of their own. It seems to me that nonrepresentational theory has colonised the minds of cultural geographers at precisely the time when close scrutiny of *representational* forms (in precisely the manner demonstrated by Imogen Tyler) is badly needed. To be sure, some proponents of non-representational theory have argued that our ‘encounters’ with ‘presentations’ require study, but their collective dismissal of the signifying power and symbolic ordering of representational forms seems light years from being relevant to the (class) struggles that define the politics of our age. Thus I can only hope that *Revolting Subjects* will be widely read beyond its disciplinary grounding in sociology/cultural studies,

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

and indeed beyond academia: it offers both analytic fortitude and refreshing political inspiration. It is a nothing short of a beautiful heresy in these revolting times.

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