

# Rethinking Social Exclusion

*THE END OF THE SOCIAL?*

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## Introduction: Post-crash Social Exclusion

I muse upon my country's ills

The tempest bursting from the waste of Time

On the World's fairest hope linked with man's foulest crime.

Herman Melville, 'Misgivings'

### Things cannot go on as they are...

We began writing this book in 2012, four years into the most severe financial crash in living memory. Our exposure to the profound human consequences of this event and its aftermath – via daily media coverage but also via our ongoing empirical work in areas of permanent recession in the north of England (Winlow, 2001; Winlow and Hall, 2006; Hall et al., 2008) – compelled us to reconsider the book's structure and content. The fallout from liberal capitalism's latest spectacular convulsion dragged the system itself from its background location in the analysis of social exclusion to centre stage. In many respects this book can be read as a preliminary theoretical analysis of liberal capitalism's social consequences, based in England, but, to a large extent, generalisable throughout the West. The analysis is also embedded in a global process. The huge growth in surplus populations in global cities (see Davis, 2007), when understood in the context of imminent crises in water, food, energy, finance and the generation and distribution of money (Heinberg, 2011; Keen, 2011; Hall, 2012b) and the permanent inability of capitalism to absorb these populations into its networks of production, exchange and consumption, makes social exclusion one of the most pressing issues we face at this point in our history. A sophisticated and updated analysis of social exclusion is therefore essential, and, with this book, we hope to make a small contribution to this endeavour.

In ways we hope will become clear, excluded populations, the conditions in which they find themselves and their cultural expressions should not be considered external to or separate from the organising logic of global neoliberalism. The stark realities of life in the slums of Jakarta or Rio are as indicative of the reality of contemporary global capitalism as life in the boardrooms of Wall Street, and the same might be said of the virtual implosion of state governance in the Congo or Somalia. We also believe that the considerable harms of social and economic marginality in the West, when placed alongside the apparent inability of contemporary liberal capitalism to provide secure and civilised forms of employment for former working-class populations, represent a serious and enduring problem. Of course these harms tarnish Western liberal democracy's preferred image of itself as inclusive, meritocratic, civilised and fair, but the accompanying accumulation of everyday miseries and dissatisfactions and the prevailing sense of *lack* will, as we shall see, have a profound political resonance as the twenty-first century unfolds.

By addressing the current nature and meaning of social exclusion and economic marginality we gain some insight into the future of civil society more generally. What becomes of 'the social' if growing numbers of people are cut adrift from its organising logic – its economic transactions, relations, customs, codes and cultural norms – *and* the tradition of political contestation about its future trajectory? To answer this question, we will occasionally wander off the well-trodden sociological and social policy paths to draw upon the resources of contemporary political theory, continental philosophy and theoretical psychoanalysis, and with these intellectual tools address the evolving nature of contemporary social life more generally. We will also investigate the current condition of the Symbolic Order (see glossary), that crucial network of meaning that makes the social world comprehensible and allows us to construct and maintain a viable system of elementary truths to which we must all subscribe, truths that make communication and politics possible.

Of course, if we are to think seriously about social exclusion, we must first establish whether, amid neoliberalism's destructive conflagration, the social is still there to be excluded from. Do we now, as some notable commentators have claimed, occupy a *post*-social world in which the structuring reality of public life and social institutions has been replaced by a milieu of atomised individuals struggling for finger-holds in fields of mere representation? If this is true, on what basis can individuals and groups be said to be 'excluded' from something that might not exist in the way we once understood it? This forces upon us a new context in which traditional questions, plus a few supplementary ones, need to be asked and a few preliminary answers provided. What is the power that drives this exclusion, and what is the status of the excluded in the eyes of this power? What might social exclusion mean for those categorised as 'the excluded', and what are the

consequences of the exclusionary process for those who manage to remain connected to the social mainstream? In a more straightforward manner, what are the political, economic or social *functions* of exclusion? What do today's forms of social exclusion tell us about culture, economy, politics, subjectivity (see glossary) and the ways in which we constitute collective life in the contemporary post-political period?

In many respects, these rather basic questions have become lost amid a growing assortment of empirical studies that endlessly describe the realities of marginality, and frenetic yet ineffective policy work that has scoured the landscape of 'civil society' to find 'transformative solutions' to the problem of exclusion, or at least ameliorate its most harmful effects. In our view, however, we need to rethink the problem of exclusion from its philosophical and theoretical roots and open the field up to the types of critical analysis that can advance our understanding of the key issues involved and the connection of social exclusion to other socioeconomic processes that are reshaping our world. As one might imagine, this deliberate attempt to remove 'social exclusion' from its current academic and political location (as a 'problem' to be managed through 'policy', its harms reduced wherever possible) and subject it to a renewed theoretical critique requires a broad yet deep analysis that explores fields of enquiry that are usually regarded as marginal at best. The root of this renewed critique is social change, individualism and the loosening of social bonds in the post-political twenty-first century, a period during which the engine of historical progress appears to have stalled and liberalism's assumption of ceaseless, incremental, progressive economic and cultural evolution in relatively stable and benign social contexts was revealed as mere modernist myth-making. The act of admitting that this profound change *has* actually occurred allows anyone who does so to ask more revealing questions. What remains of the network of community obligations and interdependencies that defined modernity's civic and sociocultural life? What does the transformed nature of the city tell us about emerging forms of envy, social anxiety, insecurity and hostility, sometimes manifested in crime and violence (see Hall et al., 2008)? How might the withdrawal of the moneyed classes from public spaces and civic institutions – a retreat into gated and guarded compounds in order to avoid upsetting encounters with the pathologised 'real world' (see Atkinson and Smith, 2012) – be connected to the social processes that ensure the exclusion of the poorest and their consignment to specific areas of the city? As we hope readers will quickly appreciate, social exclusion is not simply a 'problem', an aberration in an otherwise progressive socioeconomic system, an ailment whose micro-causes and effects can be easily identified, isolated and 'fixed' by a sympathetic and benevolent governmental elite. Rather, the problem of 'social exclusion' reflects a broader 'problem of the social' during a period characterised by the restoration of liberal capitalism and its marketisation of the social world in the almost total absence of a political,

economic or ideological alternative (Badiou, 2009). In this context, the principal issue becomes this: are we looking at social exclusion or the exclusion of the social from the most important domains of our lives?

The ultimate social impact of twenty-first century forms of embedded underemployment, worklessness and social redundancy have yet to be fully revealed. So far, the portentous signs thrown up by enduring global economic turmoil suggest that there is no simple remedy that might enable global capitalism to incorporate the rapidly growing global population or reconnect marginal populations in Western liberal democracies to the social mainstream by reintroducing stable and reasonably remunerative forms of employment. Put bluntly, how will capitalism continue to define itself as the most inclusive and productive economic system when growing numbers of people find it increasingly difficult to find the waged labour that might allow them to meet basic material needs and participate in the social and cultural activities that signify inclusion? And, given the increasingly acknowledged structural inconsistencies and practical limitations of global neoliberalism (Krugman, 2008; Stiglitz, 2010; Roubini, 2011), is it really possible to regard capitalism itself as the elixir of growth and progress in developing countries? Can it really 'civilise' failed states, or recover apparently lawless areas of the developing world (Wiegratz, 2010, 2012; Currie, 2011)?

In the chapters that follow, we will attempt to answer these questions and criticise the assumptions they reveal. We will look closely at the history of the capitalist project to represent a current reality in which the majority have been persuaded to stop seeking a genuine alternative or believing that such a thing is possible. We will analyse the fluctuations of volatile global markets and the serious outcomes of these fluctuations for everyday men and women, but we also hope to go a good deal further by asking, once again, why the marginalised do not rebel or self-organise in opposition. We are particularly keen to investigate the continued dominance, by means of the hegemony of consumerism, of capital over our everyday lives, cultures and institutions. To this end we will outline a theory of marginalised subjectivity that is markedly different from the dominant liberal concepts of the subject as the sovereign individual and the moral agent constituting its surrounding cultural norms and socioeconomic structures, or the 'subject as pliable object' constituted and normalised by external forces that are largely beyond its control or understanding.

Right-wing commentators are largely in agreement with the dominant neoclassical conception of a subject whose 'bad choices' and 'anti-social values and norms' ensure continued poverty and marginality. The liberal-left, often drawing upon symbolic interactionism and post-structuralism, counter this by claiming that the powerful demonise and stigmatise the economically excluded and label them with a broad range of negative characteristics. At its most extreme this becomes a process of 'othering', where the forbidding image of an uncivilised, feckless, dangerous and criminal other is projected

upon the excluded subject, making its inclusion appear impossible. Whilst avoiding the right's dogmatic voluntarism and moralism, however, we are also keen to move beyond the liberal-left's equally doctrinaire notion that this symbolic 'othering' is the primary cause of social exclusion or indeed the issue that demands political attention.

Focusing primarily on social exclusion in Western liberal democracies, especially Britain and America, we will throughout this book attempt to identify the human costs of social exclusion. Whilst choice plays a role in individual responses – and even then we cannot understand choice without understanding the drives and desires that underpin it – we have no intention of portraying poverty and exclusion as the results of choices. There might be contexts in which choices are made, but, in the fourth year of a global economic downturn, we will not hesitate to offer measured doses of 'economic determinism' and 'ideology critique' when we address the roots of social inequality and exclusion. Poverty is not a lifestyle choice, and the cultures that develop in its shadow are rarely autonomous, rational and creative responses to immediate economic circumstances and cultural priorities that have been inherited from the past or imposed by neoliberalism's current processes.

However, in the mainstream academic and policy-making fields, the dominant intellectual tradition currently informing the analysis of social exclusion in Britain is not the radical liberalism of the neoclassical right (see glossary) or the postmodernist left (see glossary), but a more considered Fabian social democratic (or social liberal) approach. Many working in this tradition emphasise the significant improvements that were made to the lives of everyday people in the post-war years before the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s. During this period the state regulated business practice to a much greater extent, provided a comprehensive welfare system, taxed wealth, controlled capital flows, used fiscal stimulus to promote growth, maintained control over key national industries, significantly narrowed the gap between rich and poor, and attempted to ensure the continuation of full employment for work-aged populations. We concede that for the British working classes this period of prolonged social improvement represents something of a 'golden age' (Bauman, 2000) and that a return to the politics of that era would indeed represent a significant improvement to the life chances of everyday working and non-working people. We also concede that other significant social benefits would follow in the wake of the return of a genuine social democracy. But despite all this, we cannot fully endorse the social democratic approach, and the reasons for our departure from the social democratic orthodoxy will become clear as the book progresses.

We should note, of course, that in today's dispiriting political climate, even to suggest that we should tax wealth to a greater degree, or that the state should make a commitment to full employment, is to invite popular derision. In the here and now, even the pragmatic Fabian social democrat is

depicted as an unworldly idealist (Winlow, 2012a). Given the volatile and brutally competitive nature of global market activity tied to the unforgiving principles of comparative advantage and cost efficiency, and given capital's arcane financial mechanisms and web of tax havens, is the return of genuine social democracy possible? We must note that the social democratic compromise was possible only during a period of unprecedented and sustained economic growth at a historically high rate (Cairncross and Cairncross, 1992; Harvey, 2010; Wolff, 2010). Such a rate of growth is now reaching its objective limit (Heinberg, 2011; Hall, 2012b), which means that, as it slows down, the growth-dependent Keynesian economic platform necessary for social democracy to succeed cannot be reconstructed. In this unprecedented situation of enforced economic downsizing, can the raw, destructive power of the profit motive really be harnessed and set to work pursuing positive social ends? Despite the near collapse of the banking system, can we picture our current batch of political leaders abandoning the rhetoric of the free market and their perverse attachment to 'light-touch regulation' to once again pursue a genuinely inclusive socioeconomic project? If the beast in capitalism's cage can no longer be harnessed by a social democratic state, and there is no will amongst the establishment to do so, what are the implications for social exclusion?

At the risk of antagonising some of our peers, we should perhaps also consider the possibility that many in the social democratic mainstream who issue their call for 'real jobs' and the return of a comprehensive welfare system are secretly aware that their demands can no longer be met. Perhaps the most striking gap in social democratic thinking about social exclusion is that, in seeking to reintroduce the 'excluded' back into the civic mainstream, they are arguing for the reintroduction of resource-poor workers back into the very system of relentless socio-symbolic competition that expelled them in the first place. Social democratic discourses of inclusion are always shot through with the idea that expanding opportunities is the way back to an inclusive society. Are they not essentially arguing that the poor be given another shot at 'making it' within the system as it currently exists, rather than arguing for a fundamental reappraisal of the conditions under which social and economic justice can actually take place? Our goal here is to sidestep this debate about the reintroduction of 'real jobs' and the intellectual injunction that we up-skill the poor and equip them with the drive to compete. Instead, we want to ask searching questions about the drivers that lead to the expulsion or marginalisation of the poor, and, more fundamentally, whether inclusion is possible at all in a capitalist economy currently experiencing a permanent reduction in its growth-rate and a seismic shift in the balance of global economic power.

Rather than figuratively patching up the poor with neatly organised CVs, new qualifications and a taste for entrepreneurial accomplishment, and then sending them out once again to do battle in the unforgiving and precarious

advanced capitalist labour market, it might be more productive to address the source of social conflict and competition. Rather than attempting to push the poor back into the mainstream and hoping against hope that this time they might fare a little better, we must return to the types of critical realist (see glossary) analysis that allow us to see the reality of our world in a new light.

Instead of offering the usual account of workless populations who simply need to be 'included' by being given better chances to improve their own lot, we will attempt to offer a critical account of marginalised subjectivity (see glossary) that is deeper and more firmly located in its historical and socioeconomic locations. We will encourage the reader to think through what the unopposed and uninterrupted march of capitalism further into the twenty-first century will mean for social life and subjectivity. If it is true that minimally-regulated advanced capitalism contains within its core the fundamental cultural values of competitive individualism, atomism and functional self-interest, and that it drives new forms of economic creativity and efficiency whilst arranging the constant dissolution of the 'social' and the 'public', what does this mean for those who inhabit marginalised and impoverished social spaces? As the reader will soon gather, our goal is to shift academic consideration of social exclusion away from the dry and domesticated world of social policy into the realm of political and theoretical analysis. We do this not to dismiss or disparage social policy as a discipline, but in the hope that, by bringing the deeper context into stark relief, social policy can renew itself by feeding on a separate discourse founded on a recognition of the form and true magnitude of the 'policies' required to do anything concrete about the problem of social exclusion.

## Economic futures

The rapidly growing economic power of countries such as China, India and Brazil in recent years is closely related to the huge growth of household debt that allowed Western populations to continue purchasing the goods produced in these low-wage economies in those heady days before the global crash of 2008. A number of neoliberal commentators and economic forecasters have suggested that the rise of these new players can have a significant bearing on the revival of the global economy in the post-crash era. Some maintain that, as workers in these economies gradually become capable of accessing more consumer goods, this new economic activity can fuel a global return to growth more generally across all continents. For the moment this seems doubtful; the financial crisis has slowed growth, which is impacting badly on the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) economies. They are still growing but at nowhere near the rate required to attain the level of development enjoyed by the West in the latter half of the twentieth century. Some liberal



commentators believe that the Easternisation of the global economy will precipitate a general shift away from the greed, avarice and short-termism now infecting Western economic culture. On this vaguely 'new age' trajectory we will move towards a more inclusive and ecologically-sensitive Eastern business culture built upon decorum, honour and long-term socioeconomic relationships.

However, the incautiously optimistic suggestion that we can identify the shoots of a new benign capitalism growing in these developing countries should give us pause for thought. We should consider the possibility that these commentators are right, but for the wrong reasons (Žižek, 2008a). China's economic ascent has not been aided by the democratic elections we in the West consider absolutely vital to the continuation of Western civilisation. It is now clear that capital can thrive in the absence of democracy, as it did during its early years in the West (see Losurdo, 2011; Hall, 2012a); in fact not only can it thrive, but in the current climate it can out-compete the liberal democratic West. In many ways, open elections and popular political attitudes can act as fetters restricting the onward march of capital. If we take this point further, is it too outlandishly pessimistic to consider a future Western capitalism in which the rights of liberal democracy and social welfare have been suspended in order to compete with low-wage command-capitalist economies? That is, that our political leaders abandon the pretence of elective democracy and move to ensure that capital continues unencumbered by removing the chance that the electorate may make the wrong choices? Giorgio Agamben (2005) has already drawn attention to the ability of the polity to suspend these democratic entitlements in times of crisis, and there appears to be a current in contemporary popular culture that accepts this suspension as part of the postmodern state's mandate to ensure 'security' for 'the mainstream' in a postmodern world of manifold threats from as yet unidentified internal and external foes (see Mythen and Walklate, 2006; Mythen et al., 2009). At the time of writing, politicians in Britain were debating the removal of existing legal restrictions that prevent the summary dismissal of workers, and a similar debate is taking place across Europe as politicians battle to drive national economies back to growth.

This might be just one small aspect of a much broader trend that removes previously hard won legal entitlements from working populations to ensure the wellbeing and continuity of capitalism itself. For instance, in the run-up to the 2012 Greek election that was held as a popular response to the bail-out package of further austerity and immiseration offered to Greece by the Troika – the IMF, the European Commission and the European Central Bank – it was mooted by media commentators that elections should have been suspended until order had been restored. These commentators were advocating the suspension of democracy until the population could be trusted to make the right decisions. They clearly believed that a popular Greek rejection of the bail-out terms and the austerity package would mean a Greek withdrawal from the Euro, and that this would trigger a series of

events that would destroy European monetary union and threaten economic recovery for many years to come. We have seen many military juntas and authoritarian political parties take charge of ailing nations under economic duress in the capitalist era, and we must not dismiss the possibility that the suspension of hard won rights and entitlements to ensure neoliberal capitalism's continuity is indeed a possible outcome of today's ongoing political and economic turmoil.

Capitalism is a highly adaptable economic system that has time and again proven its ability to mutate, especially when faced with major crises and growing popular opposition. Here we draw upon Žižek (2008a) as we claim that capitalism is an inhuman force that blindly seeks its own self-interest and continuation, totally inconsiderate of the human costs of its actions. As many noted theorists have recognised, capitalism is an abstraction with real effects. It is more than the mere sum of production, consumption and the accumulation and investment of profit. It has a reality that exists beyond our immediate social experience. It is not enough to say that those who operate in the system should ensure the application of ethics to everyday business practices. For us, the reality of liberal-postmodern capitalism should compel social analysts to abandon outdated conceptions of economic organisation and think again about what the free movement of capital means for twenty-first century social life.

## Why do we need to 'rethink' social exclusion?

Against the political and economic backdrop described above, our goal is to encourage the reader to *rethink* social exclusion. But what does this mean? First, we suggest that the Western discourses that deal with social exclusion have become increasingly domesticated and non-dialectical. Despite all the research funding and spilt ink, there is little sense of forward motion in either theory or practice and little or no sign of the establishment of new truths relating to the lives of the marginalised. This is partly a reflection of the ways in which academic discussion about this crucial issue has been hamstrung by the degenerative research programmes of neoliberal governance and charitable trusts alike, aided and abetted by the attenuated critique of academia's elite research institutions.

The overarching problem in the field of social research is that the desire of funders to discover basic 'empirical facts', which are always restrictively themed and often pre-empted in the main objectives of the research programmes themselves, influences the theoretical and methodological frameworks of the social research that produces those facts. Social research becomes trapped in a vigilantly policed tautological loop, and thus the complexity of social life is rarely investigated with any honesty, fine detail or theoretical sophistication. In the act of producing data, researchers are

treated rather like gun dogs, flushing out and retrieving game so that the hunter can pop it neatly into his bag and go home.

Further down the line when it comes to analysis, funders often encourage researchers to boil down their findings to basic bullet points and extract all ‘superfluous’ contextual, critical and theoretical discussion from the final reports. Mindful of the requirements of funders, researchers are forced to work well within their intellectual abilities – indeed, to abandon much of the theoretical complexity, political awareness and critique instilled in them throughout their undergraduate and postgraduate careers – as they dilute, miniaturise and tightly focus their critique, dig up basic empirical data and construct narrowband policy-friendly analyses that the rhizomatic politico-cultural network to which their financial benefactors belong might find useful. Research that threatens to construct a new contextualised idea relating to social exclusion is considered fundable only if the idea is likely to find some traction in existing political and media circles; a new theoretical framework, no matter how sorely needed, appears, quite frankly, out of the question.

The fundamental research objective remains clear, streamlined, steadfast and ubiquitous: how can we improve what already exists cheaply, effectively and, in the political sense, unobtrusively, calmly and safely? Any research project that challenges liberal-capitalism’s conceit – that which already exists is permanent, basically good and in need of no more than a little tweak here and there to nudge us all back into the socioeconomic comfort zone – is considered biased, ideological, alarmist, unworldly and unusable, or some permutation thereof. Under no circumstances will it be funded.

With government-funded social research on poverty and marginality, the focus is strictly on the potential ‘impact’ of specific policy themes, ideas, practices and projects. What works in encouraging the poor to be more enthusiastic in their search for work? What are the likely outcomes of a new policy aimed at boosting the self-confidence of job applicants? Will IT skills and social networking help people to feel more included? Such research themes compel the researcher to define, describe and analyse the phenomenon of social exclusion in the narrow parameters laid out by the research question. Thus, apart from the occasional critical salvo that dares to draw from a broader and deeper context, the current academic ‘discourse’ on social exclusion is often little more than an accretion of the results of enforced mid-range policy analyses of issues selected by government agencies and funding bodies, contextualised in narrow theoretical paradigms based on the work of a small number of social theorists selected for their political safety, underlying reformist tendencies and indefatigable optimism.

The goal of encouraging the reader to *rethink* social exclusion is, firstly, to move beyond this official discourse and reanimate the field of social

exclusion studies, to once again make it vivid and vital, filled with political contestation and theoretical ambition, and to open up a space where it once again becomes appropriate to construct new perspectives. Secondly, the act of *rethinking* the problem involves the clearing away of established orthodoxies that clutter up the field and regiment the production of new data and theory. However, *rethinking* the problem involves more than simply criticising established tropes and intellectual frameworks. It is about encouraging ambitious researchers to consider the possibility that the existing frameworks may not simply omit key truths but may in fact be systematically constructed impediments to truth, covering up potentially revealing perspectives on reality with ideological obfuscation. The process of *rethinking* must be driven by the intent to open up the field to a renewed critical analysis. *Rethinking* is to move beyond the stultifying world of policy production, handcuffed as it is to a liberal-capitalist parliamentary structure that refuses to countenance any alternative to the economic system it manages. It is to ask bold questions about ethics and justice, about what kind of world we want to live in, about what is practicable and possible in economic terms. It is to consider the future of our species and reflect on what will become of the social as we move more deeply into a post-political period of permanent, socially destructive economic turbulence (see Hall, 2012b). It is to stop living in fear of abstract theoretical discussion, to stop bowing to the academic priests of right and left liberalism and move beyond their established repertoires to say something new and revealing.

## Hard times

The current neoliberal austerity drive that has been the most common response to the economic crisis across the West is slowly transforming the assumptions we make about welfare provision for our poorest. The naked facts of the matter reveal that for many years countries such as Britain have moved away from productive endeavours in the real economy. The nation focuses instead on financial services while relying on the more mundane aspects of the service economy to provide the basic employment that might keep at least some of the post-industrial working classes out of dole queues and social security offices. In real terms incomes for a significant majority of working populations in Britain have dropped since the 1970s, and jobs are increasingly short-term and unprotected (see Harvey, 2010; Wolff, 2010; Southwood, 2011; Standing, 2011).

Despite the platitudes of mainstream politicians about the return of a post-crash industrialism, the underlying hope is to restart the economic juggernaut of global neoliberalism by re-inflating debt markets as a means of loosening purse strings and encouraging growth in consumer spending and subsequent bank lending and investment. There is absolutely no indication

that this strategy might lead to growth in those forms of work that allow individuals and families a reasonable standard of living (Keynes, 2008; Krugman, 2012). Although the precise figure is shrouded in mystery, it has been suggested that there are upwards of 10.4 million working-age people out of work in Britain (ONS, 2009), and 5.4 million of those are claiming out-of-work benefits (ibid.). As Conservative politicians often remind us, such growth in welfare costs appears unsustainable, especially as there is currently no concerted attempt to revive production in the UK. Some nations prosper on the back of residual high-tech manufacturing, but when it comes down to the manufacture of everyday volume goods Western workforces in general continue to be 'priced out of the market'. Global corporations are of course no longer tied to particular nation states, and remain able to manoeuvre production facilities and the investment of productive capital around the globe, away from high-wage economies with restrictive tax and regulatory systems and towards developing countries and fragile democracies with desperate surplus populations. Unwilling to consider the post-Keynesian and redistributionist economic solutions now being mooted (see Keen, 2011), British politicians are left with the sole solution of driving down wages and cutting business regulations and taxes in an effort to persuade potential employers to set up production facilities in the UK. In this dismal context of post-politics and unforgiving neoliberal economics, is the social democratic call to return to manufacturing and the creation of 'real jobs' feasible?

The likelihood is that, without a root and branch reconstruction of the economic system, a return to full employment and economic participation is impossible. This has prompted us to address the future of welfare and the foundations of the *negative solidarity* that typifies postmodern popular attitudes toward taxation and welfare dependent individuals and households. How do politicians propose to address the problem of welfare in an era defined by a long-term global economic slowdown and rising underemployment? What political assumptions are made about the ability of workless and low-paid individuals, and how do these assumptions reflect the enduring 'economic liberal' view of the human being's value and place in the world? Is the standard conservative/neoliberal account of a British 'underclass' whose members are happy to remain welfare-dependent and have no desire to find work in any way reasonable, and if so, how might we explain – honestly and with neither moralistic condemnation nor naïve appreciation and optimism – the existence, beliefs, prospects and social position of such a socially excluded group? Once again, our hope is to dig beneath the surface of conservative, neoliberal and Fabian moralism to reveal what the grim reality of economic and social redundancy might mean for permanently marginalised people, and what it might tell us about our particular post-crash conjuncture and the future that lies just ahead.

## Anxious accumulation

The economic turbulence of the 1970s provided the perfect opportunity for a hitherto marginalised school of economic theory to force itself to the centre stage. As neoliberal economic guru and functionary Alan Greenspan was to admit in an inquiry into the credit-crunch, the neoclassical economics of von Mises (2007[1949]), Hayek (2001[1944]; 2006[1960]) and Friedman (1980, 1993, 2002) appeared to merge with Ayn Rand's (2007a, 2007b) 'objectivism' – a populist political pseudo-philosophy rooted in the notion of value without labour, the socioeconomic functionality of selfishness and the virtual deification of the entrepreneur – to produce the new politics of neoliberalism. Greenspan, a fervent neoliberal and objectivist, had been Chairman of the Federal Reserve in the run-up to the financial crisis, which indicates just how far this ideology had penetrated into the institutional heart of capitalist political economy. Neoliberalism argued persuasively for an end to protectionism and a rapid move to a global free market in which entrepreneurs, workers, goods and capital could traverse the globe without governmental impediment. It proposed to cut taxes and encourage the entrepreneurship and investment that could return Western economies to growth. It believed that innovation and hard work should be nurtured and rewarded, and that the freedom of the people is best secured by ensuring that the mandate of the state is kept within strictly prescribed limits. The rediscovery of neoclassical economics and its attachment to the traditional themes of political conservatism met with huge political, intellectual and popular success, and, promulgated incessantly by an increasingly powerful and partisan mass media industry, propelled Western democracies into a new age.

For a short while this ideology was in its own terms so successful – despite the destruction of so many industrial areas and their social systems in the 'first world' – that many ceased to think of its central principles and practices as 'ideological' at all. Even though some individuals were disquieted by its socially destructive consequences, these principles were accepted by default by an electorally significant majority and went a long way to becoming installed as the 'common sense' at the very foundations of our society. Neoliberal restructuring was the 'tough medicine' we all had to take to cure the 'sick body' of the economy. It was this ideology that subtly encouraged the loosening of social bonds and advocated an increasingly self-interested, insecure and defensive sociability that profoundly affected the way that we approach living our lives together. Rather than seeing the poor and unemployed as unfortunate victims of circumstance and needful of state assistance, neoliberal culture instead encouraged individuals to view them with distrust, as self-interested, feckless, lazy and prone, for reasons of faulty genetics and sub-cultural values, to criminality and violence. After

the neoliberal incursion, if solidarity existed in relation to poverty, it existed as a negative and factional solidarity based on the old Calvinist distinction between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’, in which the abstract interests of ‘taxpayers’ had to be defended against the threats posed by the greedy poor and their incessant petitions for state-sponsored welfare.

## Voting for poverty

The global success of neoliberal politics from the late 1970s to the great crash of 2008 has prompted a significant literature, which we will briefly review later. But the question of why so many working and non-working poor people voted for neoliberal political parties that articulated views and created policies directly antagonistic to their class interests is worth dwelling on for a moment. Firstly, do poorer people really vote for neoliberal parties in significant numbers? It might be more reasonable to suggest that those with a clear economic and political stake in the maintenance of the current order are more likely to vote, and more likely to vote for neoliberal parties. In Britain the absence of genuine working-class representation at the heart of the Labour Party and its policy ensures that growing numbers of traditional Labour voters no longer see any point in voting for the party and consequently abstain from voting altogether. Since the neoliberal triumph in the late 1970s, the Labour Party has elected to move further to the right in order to increase its appeal to those voters who still bother to vote, which, at the same time, increased the number who are unlikely to vote. Quite quickly, within a generation, the gap between our major political parties shrank and the bland vista of our post-political present was upon us before we knew it. All parties who populate this landscape – more arid even than Beckett imagined in *Waiting for Godot* – are afraid to offer anything that might animate those cynical and withdrawn but potentially very demanding sections of the electorate who recognise that no matter who they vote for, nothing really changes. The fundamental issue at stake here is that in many respects voters from traditional working-class areas no longer have clear political representation. Many do not recognise the combined neoliberalism and diluted Fabianism of Blair’s ‘third way’ – a concept supplied to him ready-made by liberal sociologist Lord Anthony Giddens – as in any way related to or reflective of either their subjective or class interests. Today’s Labour politicians, groomed on a fast-track educational and research path to power, do not speak to ‘their world’, ‘their beliefs’ or ‘their attitudes’. To a significant portion of the working class, contemporary Labour politicians constitute part of the metropolitan middle class elite that looks down on ‘the likes of us’ (Collins, 2005). The consequences of this clear lack of political representation and leadership will be explored throughout the book, but we should acknowledge immediately that, during the premierships of Blair

and Brown, Labour Party policy further embedded neoliberalism at the very heart of British politics and our national economy.

Perhaps the biggest indictment one can make of these Labour administrations is that the gap between rich and poor grew significantly on their watch (Hills and Stewart, 2005). Blair was perhaps Thatcher's most potent legacy, a populariser of ideological dogma who should be acknowledged as the standard-bearer of the post-political epoch, a shiny game-show host of a politician who presented the ideology of the market to the people as simple pragmatism, a socioeconomic framework that would ensure fairness and rising incomes for all. Blair did not speak to a history, a culture or a social class, and he did not speak the language of the traditional Labour Party or display any great consideration for its concerns with egalitarianism and social justice. Instead, he spoke to a new media-led politics of personal ambition, consumption and global markets while simultaneously appearing to maintain an old-fashioned 'social liberal' concern for the wellbeing of the poorest. Blair's premiership was a time in which the Labour party became, to quote Peter Mandelson – the former Business Secretary and key Blair aide – 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich' (cited in Malik, 2012). The close relationship between the shrinking industrial working class and its precarious residuum – those trapped in insecure service employment and welfare – and the Parliamentary Labour Party was clearly at an end.

Despite the artificial credit-fuelled boom that underpinned the 'economic miracle' of the Blair years, working-class employment became increasingly precarious. The problems and harms of social exclusion embedded themselves in low-income neighbourhoods around the country. Genuinely oppositional politics had already been extinguished as neoliberal ideology incorporated the residual factions of the former working class into the remorseless individualisation process and interpersonal competition that constituted the cult of market performance. The cultural erasure of everything politically or ideologically external to liberal parliamentary capitalism removed the very framework that might have allowed for the development of an alternative politics based upon a revived ethic of egalitarianism. Instead, liberal capitalism overcame its categorisation as one of a range of competing economic systems to become the only conceivable economic system. In the very same move, it shed its ideological skin and took on the appearance of elementary economic pragmatism. The profound success of this move can be seen in the fact that even now, lodged as we are in a destructive vortex generated by what might be a permanent slowdown in economic growth and the failure of light-touch regulation, we remain ensnared in the logic of neoliberalism and incapable of constructing a realistic economic and political alternative.

What else can we say about the electoral successes of neoliberal political parties? How, precisely, do they keep getting into office when their policies benefit only a small percentage of the overall population? One might reasonably claim that the fundamental nature of class identity has changed



quite considerably, and it has done so for the most part because of historic changes in the nature of capital accumulation. Basically, people today are much less likely to structure their identity in relation to a subjective sense of class belonging. Socioeconomic class might linger in the background, but it is increasingly disguised by the mutable field of culture and taste, with its porous and subjective social barriers. People these days are less tied to local traditions and cultures, less mindful of the lives, sacrifices, traditions and conventions of previous generations. For many young people, these restrictive and parochial considerations are something to escape from as the postmodern self is compelled to take on the task of Sisyphus and manufacture its own culturally astute identity (Winlow and Hall, 2006, 2009a). The contemporary postmodern subject strives for 'a life of one's own', and, for the moment at least, appears to see social bonds rooted in obligation and commitment as a straightjacket that erodes personal freedom. The dull normality of the everyday post-political present, systematically emptied of inspiring symbolism, appears to encourage the postmodern subject to balk at the very idea of dissolving the uniqueness of the self into a distressingly homogenised social group. In the political sphere the postmodern subject will not be swayed by calls to class loyalty or class interests. This subject is resolutely determined to make up its own mind in relation to ethico-cultural criteria that it believes are of its own choosing – in some cases of extreme postmodern solipsism, of its own unique and uninfluenced creation. This accelerates the dominant trend of voters moving away from the depth of policy and socioeconomic analysis towards the surface characteristics of political candidates, who of course are unique, creative and independent individuals who have chosen their own identities just like the voters have.

Other factions of the insecure and anxious post-industrial working class, perhaps less confident and less convinced of their own self-created uniqueness, grasp quite desperately at replacements for lost solidarity, identity and meaning in the narratives of nation that are so often trotted out by neoconservative politicians and commentators. In the USA especially, right-wing politicians have been remarkably successful in convincing the voting public that the nation's identity is inextricably bonded to liberal capitalism, and that any suggestion that the economy is subject to a greater degree of governmental regulation is 'unamerican', smacking of the inherent evils of defunct state communism (Frank, 2005, 2006). In this factional domain, it is almost as if the painfully free postmodern subject, no longer authorised and constituted as an individual by the collective fictions of the traditional Symbolic Order (see glossary), is attempting to grab hold of a mythical history in the vague hope that it might provide stability and fixity upon which some sense of clarity and belief can be developed (see Winlow and Hall, 2012a). Here, as long as the elite's representatives can maintain the seductive myth of the great national spirit – 'we're all in it together' – the working class voter will vote for a political party that continues to ensure that the elite are

the ultimate beneficiaries of an economy whose neoliberal logic will further reduce the likelihood that workers will be able to sell their labour with a reasonable degree of continuity at a level able to support a reasonably civilised standard of living. They do this not because of stupidity but in order to address a complex form of subjective lack that neoconservative/neoliberal political partnerships promise to address with their clear focus on national identity, immigration controls and economic competitiveness.

These very basic points also inform the claim that, in an era that dismisses collective identities as a dead weight on individuality and freedom, the contemporary 'working-class' subject responds to exploitation and precariousness not by mobilising against the oppressor class but by attempting to join its ranks. The current inability of the postmodern subject to find utility, solidarity and common purpose in collective identities tends to prevent the establishment of new forms of political universality that have historically counteracted the destructive atomising effects of the cash nexus and sought a new reality built upon the ethics of cooperation and egalitarianism. The inability of the current political and economic conjuncture to encourage individuals to see their interests in relation to others of a similar socioeconomic position suggests that we now occupy an era of post-political biopolitics (see Chapter 5).

In terms of actual policy, there is very little difference between mainstream politicians; in essence, the cynic's cliché that 'they're all the bloody same' has become a reality. The general electorate must choose a candidate on the basis of some vague sense of who will benefit them personally. Political opposition to neoliberal excess and the brutal reallocation of money and assets from working populations to the super-rich – upwards of £13 trillion currently hidden away in global tax havens (Stewart, 2012b; see also Shaxson, 2012) – is expressed in the most attenuated and apologetic manner only by the political opponents that liberal capitalism itself appoints. Because there is no longer an organised political opposition, because the left has abandoned any conception of class struggle or an egalitarian future – or even a social democracy in which the huge gap in wealth and power can be seriously truncated – to focus exclusively on defending the human rights and arranging the piecemeal 'social inclusion' of marginalised identity groups, capitalism itself exists for ordinary voters as pure *doxa*, the common belief of what is and always will be. Indeed, such is the certainty of its permanent reign, even the word 'capitalism' had largely fallen out of use in political and academic circles. For the liberal-postmodern subject, existing in the absence of a politics that seeks to offer an account of subjective hardships, injustices, anxieties and rage, the social field of ceaseless struggle for symbolic and cultural capital becomes naturalised and the subject accepts – and then embraces and clings to – the myth of meritocracy. Their own inner torment, their enduring sense of lack and their fear of economic and cultural irrelevance compels them to throw themselves anew into capitalism's competitive

struggle for social distinction. Until real politics returns, the very idea of transforming the other into a true neighbour, cleansing the realm of politics of its corruption or creating a new reality built upon social justice seems impossible, even ridiculous. The compensation, the safety barrier that prevents the plunge over the edge into total nihilism and despair, is the hope that the self might one day make the journey from exploited to exploiter. Such hope is presented daily by the mass media as liberal capitalism's great attraction, and today's subjects plot their journeys to 'inclusion' and eventual safety up the league table of contemporary consumer culture.

The point here is to encourage the reader at this early stage not simply to focus on the relative successes of the right but also to bear in mind the failures of the left. In Britain, the old socialist and social democratic discourses that created a labour movement capable of winning significant improvements in the lifestyles and entitlements of everyday working men and women were crushed by the rapid rise of neoliberalism, which used the open, competitive global market as the brutal instrument of social disruption and reconfiguration. In the eyes of those who voted for her, especially those members of the reasonably affluent and upwardly mobile working class, Thatcher won the argument about economic management in the 1980s (see Jenkins, 2007; Vinen, 2010). For her, the era of Keynesian demand management, with its panoramic welfare state, was dead. Using the mass media to ram home the message of TINA – 'there is no alternative' – the national economy could recover and move forward only if neoliberal politicians could reduce the size of the state, sell off public utilities, abandon ailing manufacturing industries and tackle the militancy of the labour unions that were reducing the efficiency of British business and holding the national economy to ransom. The seductive dream of a new era of neoliberal prosperity won the day, and it did so at least in part because those on the left misunderstood the nature of their adversary, abandoned their core values and capitulated to those who argued for a renewed Fabian reformism, a centre-leftist narrative that, dressed up in fashionable liberal-postmodernist verbiage, accepted the new economic reality and focused on defending the rights of marginalised social groups forced to struggle for an existence within it.

## Some notes on the structure of the book

We have tried to sketch out a basic outline of what is to come in the preceding pages, but it is perhaps useful to provide a brief chapter outline before the book begins in earnest. In Chapter 2 we engage with the dominant European discourse on social exclusion. We outline key principles and try to identify the intellectual evolution of the field. In Chapter 3 we address the North American analysis of 'the underclass', and pay particular attention to the neoclassical model of human subjectivity (see glossary) usually associated

with the political right. In Chapter 4 we begin to offer an original theoretical account of the problem of contemporary social exclusion. This begins with an analysis of the current condition of political economy and labour markets and, in Chapter 5, moves on to consider more directly the contemporary political context. Chapters 6 and 7 offer a creative engagement with two of the dominant ideas in what we might call 'social exclusion studies'. In Chapter 6 we explore the idea that the contemporary poor continue to constitute a reserve army of labour, and in Chapter 7, we attempt to move beyond Bauman's claim that the poor are excluded as a result of their inability to engage with the cultures of consumerism. In Chapter 8 we begin to address the problem of social exclusion using the intellectual tools of transcendental materialism (see glossary). Rather than simply offer an abstract discussion of the absent centre of political ontology, we begin our analysis by looking at the growth of what we might call post-social space, the new commercialised areas of the city that appear entirely devoid of the symbolic substance usually associated with really existing social life. In Chapter 9 we extend this discussion and try to outline clearly what the historic decline of symbolic efficiency means for the lives of the poorest. Much of our analysis across these chapters is quite polemical and seeks to banish the unrealistic optimism that prevents the social scientific analysis of social exclusion advancing from its present position. But our analysis is not blindly pessimistic. Instead, we hope to encourage the development of ultra-realist approaches to the study of social exclusion; an approach that captures with honesty the debilitating problems and social divisions of the contemporary post-crash world, and refuses to be held back by the liberal left's timeless romance of organic egalitarianism and resilient community life in the West's most impoverished areas. But despite what might be regarded by some as a bleak assessment of post-politics and the enduring power of global capitalism and its supporting ideology, we close the book with a note of optimism. It is, after all, possible to create a more just and equitable world if we wish to. In Chapter 11 we extend our analysis of Žižek and Badiou in order to give some sense of how change might develop and what it might look like. All that remains to be said is 'welcome to the book'. We hope you find value in our brief contribution and that you can recognise a deeper honesty and hope underneath the bleakness that often characterises the surface of our project.