

Under a Middle-Class Gaze

5.1 Governing Inequality

Capitalism harms human beings through neglect, rather than through terror. Compared to the personal will of the dictator, the structural violence of the market “forces” appears benign. Those individuals or groups excluded from capitalism’s dreamworlds appear themselves to blame. The fate of the poor is social ostracism. Their gulag is the ghetto.

BUCK-MORSS, 2002: 188

An important aspect of the neoliberal transformation of society is the recruitment of civil society to serve its objectives. Foucault has pointed to the central role of the new homo oeconomicus in this, a figure thought of in terms of the individual as an “entrepreneur of oneself”, maximizing himself or herself as “human capital” in competition with all other individuals [...] this process not only adds to the general securitization which the neoliberal government of conduct promotes, but it is also destructive of social bonds and the conditions for social cohesion. This poses a severe problem for the neoliberal state, which it attempts to resolve by reconstituting racism and through war.

LAZZARATO, 2009: 111

These two citations above disclose different structures and dimensions of inequality, exclusion, coercion, and exploitation met in capitalist states. Susan Buck-Morss’ citation demonstrates the limits of the kind of “freedom” associated with capitalism and the regimes of exclusion it creates, particularly in the absence of welfare institutions. Exclusion occurs organically, and its violence is much more abstract than the one potentially exercised by a dictator. For this reason, it can be normalised easier. In Lazzarato’s text, one reads about the possible trajectory when the norm described by Buck-Morss is ruptured. Given that the capitalist society is in a process of constant flux, crisis and restricting, racism and war can emerge as viable options for the system’s conservation in critical moments. Within the generalised social mobilization context of the neoliberal society, competition between all creates an extensive state of insecurity with detrimental effects on social cohesion. Apparent in state policies and institutions, racism is further triggered during historical moments of high

insecurity especially in the absence of a counter-hegemonic political horizon. War then becomes the ultimate frontier, when racism fails to produce the desired systemic effects.

5.2 The Middle-Class Gaze and the Media

Skeggs (2003: 99; 1997) demonstrates that there is a long history of representing the lower/working classes through the idea of excess: as being wasteful, tasteless, self-damaging, deceitful, infantilised and irrational. The lower/working classes are generally constructed as regressive and senseless by the middle/upper classes (Skeggs, 2003: 111). Opposed to such excesses, the upper/middle classes are liberal, rational, self-constrained, mannered, smart, austere and motivated.

Departing from Bourdieu's (2010) seminal text *Distinction*, scholars (Ben-
nett, 2013; Eriksson, 2015) argue that mass media organise their representational frames on social affairs under a middle-class gaze, which suggests to audiences the preferred ways of looking at things. The media's middle-class positioning affirms core bourgeois values shared and aspired to by the middle-class. The middle-class forms the ideal social position, setting a "middle-class normative" (Skeggs & Wood, 2012: 52) that is reproduced by the media through the ways that representations are framed. In this context, the working class and the poor often lapse into the position of the "underclass" (Jones, 2015), associated with different forms of social and individual problems and pathologies, and charged with violence, ignorance and despair. Skeggs (1997) noted that the weight of upper-middle-class values, lifestyles and aspirations establishes a general disidentification with the working class position. The hegemony of the middle class makes a deeply ideological process, connected to the rise of neoliberalism and the efforts of Margaret Thatcher in the UK during the 1980s, to "eradicate class as a social category (and not as a social distinction)" (Skeggs, 1997: 78) and, along with it, to destroy the power of the labour unions and parties, as well as the working class culture, values, social relations and lifestyles associated with it; "No doubt Thatcherism has informed this slippage from working to underclass and has influenced the construction of distinctions within the working class" (Skeggs, 1997: 76).

The working class does not have "access to the legal, aesthetic or moral authority which gives legitimacy to social positions (Lamont, 1992) which could generate positive valuing" (Skeggs, 1997: 76). Political economy studies demonstrate that the media are capitalist businesses reproducing bourgeois ideology (Fuchs, 2016), blocking the working-class experience from emerging into the mainstream public sphere (Negt & Kluge, 2016). In principle, the institutions