

## Whose crisis? Spatial imaginaries of class, poverty and vulnerability

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*“Crises are about change...crises are opportunities to impose new ideas and practices.”*  
(French and Leyshon, 2010, p. 2549)

These commentary pages have included a number of discussions of economic recession and fiscal crisis around the world in recent years. French and Leyshon (2010), quoted above, lament what they see as the Left’s failure to take advantage of this upheaval to challenge previously unassailable ‘truths’ of neoliberal policy. Hendrikse and Sidaway (2010) argue that recent fiscal crises have enabled an emergent ‘neoliberalism 3.0’, in which austerity and cutbacks are a pre-ordained necessity to be embraced for their potential to produce new forms of ‘creativity’ as economies and individuals struggle to respond. Tomany et al. (2010) examine (and rightly critique) policy prescriptions calling for ever-greater spatial concentrations of economic activity as the route back to prosperity. Wainwright (2010) calls for more geographically sensitive scholarship, arguing that blanket characterizations of a ‘global’ crisis overlook important national and regional variations in both causal mechanisms and felt effects.

Yet in addition to these pressing political economic transformations and concerns, periods of crisis are also times of intensive drawing and redrawing of social boundaries (Watkins 1993, Peck 2010, Klein 2007), in ways that warrant our close attention. The geographies of crisis, other scholars remind us, are always also social, cultural, discursive and symbolic. Sidaway (2008) argues that how a crisis is named has deep implications for how policy is framed and blame is meted out, noting that the crisis of the US housing market has been termed a ‘subprime’ mortgage crisis, not a ‘predatory lending crisis’. This framing suggests culpability on

the part of those affected (for their status as ‘subprime’ borrowers), and obscures the dishonest or irresponsible practices of some mortgage lenders, not to mention the untenable loan products sold to many of these borrowers. Rose (2011), writing about the 2011 uprising in Egypt, argues that crises are a powerful terrain for making and remaking subjectivities, as people create new narratives to try to ground a self in the face of the unpredictability, unknowability, and often inexplicability “...of an irruptive world” (p. 987).

In the paragraphs that follow, we extend these points in several ways. Contestations over naming and narratives in crisis are, we suggest, central to the social boundary (re)making that occurs in them. It is not just identities and subjectivities that are being negotiated, but social relations. The social categories and narratives emerging from crisis mark not just a self but an other, in ways that are deeply relational. They render not just the subjectivities we claim for ourselves amidst upheaval, but also the explanations, characterizations and categories we create to try to explain (and often intervene in) the position of others. Further, spaces and spatial imaginaries are implicated in the production of poverty and class difference and their reworking in times of crisis. Places named ‘suburbs’ or ‘inner city’ for instance, and their particular geo-histories, play a role in constituting identities. Crisis disrupts not just individuals’ identities but broadly held societal notions of the spaces and subjects of poverty and ‘middle class-ness’.

In the recent recession in the US<sup>1</sup> (termed by some The Great Recession and arguably dated 2007-2010) media, political and civic discourse have sought to articulate where economic crisis and purported recovery are felt and by whom, and to explain why some people and places are the victims of crisis, or beneficiaries of recovery. These narratives are powerful sources of transformation because they produce and rework social and spatial categories (such as ‘middle

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<sup>1</sup> We draw on examples from the recent US recession, but do not mean to suggest this crisis has been ‘global’. The socio-spatial imaginaries of class, poverty and crisis that we discuss here are embedded in contingent histories and geographies of race, place, and nation.

class', 'poor', or 'suburb') and invest them with meaning. They make some differences visible and others invisible, situate some people and places as sympathetic and deserving of help and others not, and render certain forms of assistance necessary and acceptable (or not). We will show these narratives of crisis are powerful mechanisms in re-negotiating dominant social and spatial imaginaries of class and poverty, normative understandings of what it means to be 'poor' or 'middle class', and as well as individuals' own identities, subjectivities, and attitudes toward (different) others.

We draw on conceptions of class and poverty as practices of social ordering and as objects of governance (Foucault 1980, Bourdieu 1984). Poverty and class are of course rooted in material relations, but are also cultural political projects that produce and transform social identities and mediate between cultural and political-economic relationships. From this perspective, social categories used to frame class, poverty, or economic crisis have constitutive effects in the world, as their 'looping effects' (Hacking 2002) shape individual and collective behaviors, social policy, and institutions. But as we show below, these looping effects are often contradictory or ambiguous, and there is much we do not understand about their implications for social and political alliances and divisions in times of crisis.

Nonetheless, the production and contestation of social categories during economic crisis is clearly an important dimension in (re)drawing social boundaries that in turn shape who is responsible for poverty, who is deserving of state support, and what sort of assistance is appropriate. For example, efforts to describe the people and places most affected by crisis often generate new social and spatial imaginaries. In dialogue about the US Great Recession, one such new narrative is the notion of an emerging 'suburban poor'. Quantitative evidence seems to support the case: Poverty in suburbs increased by over 50% in recent years (compared to 26% in

urban areas) and 2/3 of these impoverished suburban households were added from 2007-2010 as middle class residents fell on hard times (Tavernise 2011). These measurable material downturns are deeply problematic, of course, yet the narrative of a ‘suburban poor’ is also significant. This socio-spatial imaginary of poverty in the suburbs is a distinct departure from long-standing notions of the suburbs as the site of a stable and prosperous middle class. It also reframes poverty as a problem of middle class slippage, rather than as a defining feature of late capitalism.

Further, the spatial imaginary of American suburbia is part of what constitutes middle class identities, making the idea that there is poverty in the suburbs disruptive (Ruben 2001). Indeed, the notion of a suburban poor is met with contradictory responses. Interviewed in the media, the director of suburban Cleveland food pantry reports she finds skepticism when she tries to fundraise in local churches. Parishioners reinforce the cultural inconceivability of suburban poverty, saying, “This is Parma Heights, not Cleveland.” (George in Tavernise, 2011). A researcher suggests that local policy-makers have a similar difficulty in shifting their socio-spatial imaginaries of poverty and class, saying, “The whole political class is just getting the memo that Ozzie and Harriet don’t live here anymore.”(Hill in Tavernise, 2011). Yet the counter-narrative of a new suburban poverty mobilizes other individuals in the community to voluntary service and advocacy for inclusive social assistance programs they never before imagined necessary. If we are to fully understand the impacts of economic crisis, we must better understand the oppositional responses to the disjunctures between such longstanding narratives about who is poor or middle class and where, and new counter-narratives articulated in crisis. When, where and why are counter-narratives such as a ‘suburban poor’ met with resistance and reinforcement of existing imaginaries, versus new insights about the changing socio-spatial dynamics of vulnerability or need for forms of assistance and engagement?

Economic crisis disrupts not just social and spatial narratives of poverty, class, prosperity and vulnerability, but also temporal imaginaries. In the US, the notion of progressively improving status over the life course and between generations is central to a middle class identity. As articulated by a Michigan women laid off in widespread public sector cutbacks: “We are losing the bulk of our middle class. I was much better off than my parents and I’m feeling my children will not be as well off as I was.” (Williams 2011). The effects of these ruptures in anticipated life trajectories are engendering new social objects of concern such as ‘the Boomerang Generation’ – young people who return home to live with their parents, often remaining well into adulthood (Parker 2012, Hirsch 2010). The notion of a Boomerang Generation was in place well before the Great Recession. Yet recent debates about how to interpret the disrupted life trajectory marked by the label ‘Boomerang Generation’ are inextricably linked to cultural narratives about poverty, class, economic vulnerability, and prosperity. Some commentators frame these young adults as undeserving ‘slackers’ not willing to work hard for the lifestyles they want. Others understand them as victims of economic crisis who deserve assistance and whose presence perhaps signals a dramatic change in middle class life trajectories.

More broadly, concern about a growing Boomerang Generation in the US recession underscores the extent to which the very notion of a crisis is predicated upon overlooking longstanding struggles of some in the face of deep societal inequalities. The ‘Boomerang Generation’ referenced in much of this debate is largely middle class and normatively white. Impoverished and non-white young adults have long had difficulty garnering sufficient income and reliable employment, yet this has not been scripted as a crisis. As an impoverished North Carolina woman noted, “I live the recession. All that stuff that happened to people, that’s my life

every day.” (DeParle et al. 2011a). Her observation begs the question of whether the new visibility of (some) losses and vulnerabilities in crisis has any implications for the longstanding invisibility of persistent poverty.

Such debates over how we should interpret the straightened circumstances of the Boomerang Generation or any group seen as especially affected in crisis have deep implications for how we view and respond to the vulnerabilities produced in economic transformation. They demand our attention precisely because they stand to re-negotiate societal understandings of what it means to be middle class or poor, who is likely to be so, how we can explain their status, or how individuals and institutions should respond. Contestation over the social, spatial, and temporal categories articulated to try to capture the nature of vulnerability amidst economic downturn are deeply formative not just because they negotiate ideas about who and where ‘the poor’ or ‘the middle class’ are, but because they shape ideas about *what it means* to be poor or middle class.

Consider for instance, intense recent debate over the category ‘the near poor’. This term has been offered to describe people whose income is above the US federal poverty line but less than 150% of the poverty level income for their household size (DeParle, Gebeloff, and Tavernise 2011). Discussion of this group emerged on the heels of the US Census Bureau’s release of a new Supplemental Poverty Measure<sup>2</sup> and arguments that, by this measure, ‘the near poor’ expanded tremendously during the Great Recession. While much of the ensuing debate focused on the validity of supplemental poverty measure and data used to assess it, the term near poor also engendered heated debate, especially vis-à-vis the meanings associated with the terms poor or poverty. A researcher from a conservative policy think-tank argued that “...the

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<sup>2</sup> The Supplemental Poverty Measure accounts for local cost of living, factors like food stamps or tax credits, and expenditures for taxes or medical care (rather than looking at cash income alone).

emotionally charged terms ‘poor’ or ‘near poor’ clearly suggests to most people a level of material hardship that doesn’t exist,” and signals experiences like hunger and homelessness that he argues are not experienced by those falling in the category named ‘near poor’ (Rector in DeParle et al. 2011b). Applying the term poor to any household that owns an XBOX game system, he argued, is misleading about the degree of their need or vulnerability (DeParle et al. 2011a).<sup>3</sup> Other commentators argued that invoking needs and vulnerabilities associated with societal notions of poverty is entirely appropriate, given the hidden needs experienced by households categorized as near poor as they struggle with, for example, high medical costs. In these instances, we see that contestations of the semantic category near poor are in effect also negotiations over social imaginaries of what it means to be poor or what poverty ‘looks like’ in terms of specific experiences, consumption patterns, and risks. We have a great deal yet to learn about whether such contestations re-work broadly accepted meanings associated with poverty and class; and the extent to which the poverty politics of crisis (as well as ensuing responses to crisis) are inclusive of people and places who experiencing persistent poverty, or only those more recently affected by economic downturn.

Societal notions of who is poor or middle class and where, and what this means with respect to lived experiences are tightly held, even when contradicted by material conditions experienced in crisis. A North Carolina man living close to the U.S. poverty threshold says, “I ain’t poor. I eat. I got a roof over my head” (DeParle et al 2011a). He rejects an identification as poor even as he experiences the material effects of poverty, drawing on dominant narratives of poverty as (only) defined by experiences of hunger and homelessness. Other Americans continue to identify as middle class as they slip into poverty, and offer fierce critiques of publicly funded

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<sup>3</sup> These comments reference a larger report from the Heritage Foundation entitled “Air Conditioners, Cable TV, and an XBOX: What Is Poverty in the United States Today?” (Rector and Sheffield, 2011).

social assistance even as their reliance upon it grows (Appelbaum and Gebeloff 2012), contradictions we might begin to trace to cultural narratives that imbue ‘middle class’ with attributes of self-sufficiency, morality, and hard work. In these examples, we see hints of the constitutive effects of social imaginaries of class and poverty upon identities, subjectivities, and attitudes toward social assistances, as well as their durability even in the face of directly felt contradictions. But for some people, the lived dislocations and struggles of crisis prompt a re-working of their own attitudes and identities. A Michigan woman, pitched into poverty and then homelessness through unemployment and health problems points to a transformation in her own beliefs as she reflects on her year-long struggle to find employment: “If you had told me before that a person could look for a year and not find a job, I’d have said they were just lazy.” (Goodman 2009). Clearly, cultural narratives of class and poverty mediate between lived vulnerabilities and struggles in crisis and individual identities and attitudes but in complicated and unpredictable ways.

Finally, there is a great deal yet to learn about how and whether experiences of shared vulnerability in crisis might lead not just to shifts in individuals’ own identities and attitudes, but to new forms of action and alliance. In some times and places, the experiences of shared vulnerability and struggle in crisis have generated new forms of alliance or broad societal support for new forms of social assistance. The broadly experienced effects of the Great Depression in the US in the 1920s and 30s arguably undergirded the ensuing cross-class support for expanded social assistance institutions that endure today. In Argentina’s currency crisis of 2001, Adamovsky (2009) finds evidence that formerly middle class people impoverished by the crisis rethought dominant narratives about poverty and created new alliances to help themselves and others. Many commentators have pointed to the Occupy Movement and its cry “We are the



99%” as mobilizations of a more inclusive ‘us’ by middle and poorer groups experiencing shared vulnerabilities amid economic downturn. But alongside such alliances across social and economic difference, there are countless other instances in which crisis has been met by new and intensified forms of social division, and actions/policies that further marginalize poorer people and places.

We have argued here that the social boundary re-drawing that often occurs amidst economic crisis emerge through re-negotiation and contestation of dominant social and spatial imaginaries of class and poverty, normative understandings of what it means to be ‘poor’ or ‘middle class’, and as well as individuals’ own identities, subjectivities, and attitudes toward (different) others. Struggles over these emerging categories and the attributes bound up with them, or more simply put, the stories we tell about people and place, sow the seeds of social alliance and division, but in complicated ways. When, where, and why are the ruptures of crisis are interpreted through old stories and symbols or given new meanings and possibilities, and what does this mean for social alliances and divisions? Attending to these questions stands to help us build better understandings of the social and political effects of economic crisis, and build new theorizations of the connections between economic transformation and the cultural-political production of poverty, class identities, and social relations. With massive economic changes continuing in many parts of the world and being met with diverse civil society responses, these insights are more important than ever.

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