De-centering Poverty Studies: middle class alliances and the social construction of poverty

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ABSTRACT

In this lecture I explore relational poverty analysis to take seriously the spatially varied intersections of political-economic, social ordering and cultural-political processes in shaping understandings of poverty. The Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group employs a relational comparative methodology to theorize where, when and under what circumstances those framed as 'middle class' act in opposition to, or in solidarity with those named as 'poor'. Our approach focuses on the exploitive effects of capital accumulation, processes of unequal socio-spatial categorization and political and discursive systems that limit or exclude the 'poor'. Our research focuses on places experiencing capitalist crisis because intense periods of restructuring highlight material and discursive struggles over poverty. We conclude by identifying a research agenda focused on the ways in which poverty politics are constituted by the non-poor through place and in the articulation of places with processes of political-economy, governance and cultural politics.

Keywords: relational poverty, 'middle class', cultural politics, socio-spatial reordering, relational comparison

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INTRODUCTION

Post Great Depression, in 1935 President Roosevelt signed into law the federal social security act that has evolved into the single most effective anti-poverty program in the history of the United States. Social security is currently estimated to keep approximately 40% of Americans age 65 or older out of poverty. During World War II the British economist William Beveridge announced proposals for a National Social Security and Health Service for the UK. Beveridge described these programs as an 'all in scheme of social insurance that applies to everybody'. The NHS still provides the majority of healthcare for Britons today. These anti-poverty programs are built on principles of social inclusion (however imperfectly achieved) and have been relatively untouchable politically (until now). These programs were designed to include everyone (including the rich), but have been proportionately more beneficial to those in middle and lower rungs of society. I am not suggesting that these historical moments were unqualified successes, with their unconscionable exclusions (immigrants, people of color, indigenous people). Nor do I intend to offer Western welfare states as the answer to poverty. But what is interesting about these programs is they reduced poverty through a political discourse of social inclusion. I am interested in thinking about what we can learn from these moments and their imperfection, about a different politics of social inclusion to reduce poverty.

In recent months we have witnessed protest, revolution and refusal of decades of authoritarian rule across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and on around the region. These movements for democratic inclusion and improved lives involve broad coalitions of people crossing lines of class, ethnicity/race, age and gender. The protestors and revolutionaries express disgust over poverty, disenfranchisement and repression. These revolutions are a powerful narrative of our times and this history-in-the-making hopefully points to the limits of ever-deepening poverty, repression and inequality in diverse places. While these very different moments of transformation in the US, the UK and the Middle East are of course complex and over-determined, they are all characterized by deepening inequality and crisis,

coupled with broad based (cross class) support for dramatic reconfigurations of the governance and regulation of society, and of poverty/inequality in particular.

This essay focuses renewed attention on relational analyses of poverty. Relational poverty analysis theorizes impoverishment through a combination of i) exploitative effects of capital accumulation, ii) processes of unequal socio-spatial categorization and iii) political and discursive practices that limit or exclude those named as poor. This approach to poverty focuses our attention on social relationships of class, gender, race/ethnicity, generation and belonging to explain impoverishment. While poverty per se is problematic terrain, the continuing influence of authoritative (dominant) accounts of poverty -- as a self-contained problem in need of management and intervention – demands our attention. This issue is vital for tropical geographies because relational poverty analysis rethinks poverty as an ontological object, as a theoretical concept and as an object of intervention. Since poverty is a key justification (and for some a motivation) for development interventions, there are important lessons for development theory and tropical geographies in all this.

This paper critiques unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions at the heart of dominant poverty knowledge that reduce "…the problem of poverty to the characteristics of individuals abstracted from class and other power relationships… [with] the effect of depoliticizing poverty" (Harriss, 2009: 217). I draw on our inter-disciplinary and international collaborative project by the Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group. Our project decenters dominant poverty knowledge through a five-country relational comparison in Argentina, South Africa, Thailand, the U.S. and Canada. We employ a relational approach to poverty, focusing on the discursive production of 'the middle class' as a distinct object of knowledge/identity[2]. Our research explores how 'middle classness'

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[2] For us 'middle class' is not a coherent concept or category. Our project begins from the challenges and potentialities of defining 'middle class'. In social sciences middle classes are theorized through approaches focused on social relations of production and position within occupational hierarchies (Wright, 1985) *and/or* as culturalist approaches emphasizing socially-constituted identifications and meanings (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and Molnar, 1992). This project is grounded in the creative tensions that emerge from integrating these approaches. We do not seek to fix a definition of middle classes based on quantitative evidence. We argue that "…to treat the ambiguity of the term 'middle class' as a mere definitional problem for scholarly analysis would be to miss the productive political significance that

is produced, maintained and reinforced to constitute social boundaries between poor and non-poor. We focus on the constitution of middle classes for three reasons. First, middle strata are framed as aspirational classes, embodying modernity within projects of development and framed as antithetical to those named as poor (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). Second, those identifying as middle classes have played key roles in consolidating hegemonic political discourses of market reforms and social improvement (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Lawson, et.al, 2010). Third, the agency of middle class groups is under-theorized in relation to the social production of poverty.

I briefly introduce our research approach and then situate relational poverty analysis in relation to framings of dominant poverty knowledge. The following section draws together political-economy, ontological and political-cultural theories of the social production of poverty to articulate our relational poverty approach. This leads to an introduction of our empirical research which focuses on the ways in which material and identity differences between middle class and subaltern groups are (re)worked in the context of capitalist crisis. Through this work we investigate the political potential of middle class/subaltern struggles around poverty to understand where, through what mechanisms and under what circumstances 'middle classes' act in opposition to, or in solidarity with 'the poor' .[3]

DE-CENTERING AUTHORITATIVE POVERTY KNOWLEDGE

The Middle Class Poverty Politics Research Group is collaborating across six countries (Argentina, South Africa, Thailand, the US, Canada, and India to be included) to work against a "…divisive geopolitics of knowledge" (Robinson, 2003: 278; Mignolo, 2000) where Western scholars develop theoretical concepts and explanations and then merely ask researchers from the Global South to provide case studies. In contrast, from the beginning our approach involves full collaboration on

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this ambiguity holds for middle classes" (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 501). Equally important to our conceptualization of 'middle class' are socially-constituted identifications and meanings ascribed to class, race and poverty. Here middle class is theorized as emerging from identities, practices and discourses that (dis)unite people and that operate politically in important ways.

[3] Middle class poverty politics can take a range of forms including: i) building broad political support for social democracy and social protections, redistributive state policies; ii) working in solidarity for a pro-poor agenda through NGOs, social movements to combat hunger, homelessness; iv) intellectual work to build alternative social understanding, challenging hateful discourses; organizing through communities of faith, and so on.

research questions, concepts and theoretical framing through discussions and mutual learning amongst scholars living and working in places differently positioned within global circuits of poverty knowledge and power. We engage in collaboration with the goal of contesting powerful ideas about poverty in all our research sites, including the US.[4] We provincialize authoritative poverty knowledge by taking seriously the idea that the place of theorizing conditions what can be known and what can be said (Escobar, 1995; Spivak, 1990; Said, 1978; Esteva, 1987; Chakrabarty, 2000).

We grapple with relational poverty as simultaneously geo-historically specific and produced through interconnection by employing Hart's (2002) relational comparison (see also Burawoy, 2000; Roy, 2003). This methodological innovation allows us to compare cases while also investigating the ways in which places are integrated into globalized processes (see Massey, 2005, Katz, 2004; Weinbaum, et. al., 2008). For example, we view poverty emerging in the US under 'economic restructuring' in relation to poverty in Argentina or South Africa produced through 'developmentalism' to suggest that each are particular expressions of globally uneven capitalist development (see also Spivak, 1998 and Katz, 2001). We also view diverse forms of poverty as constituted in specific ecological and historical contexts (Lawson, et.al., 2010). Our conversations, conducted across the globe, have reconfigured everyone's thinking because

> "[I]n 'travelling' theory is necessarily disrupted or changed in its meaning, but it also potentially returns to the places of its origin, a vital and demanding critique of ways in which social processes in the 'centre' are understood" with the potential for learning "… from scholars working in and on other places… [to] advance more creative accounts of social processes in the societies they study" (Robinson, 2003: 276)

We are in the midst of our collaboration. We are working together through face to face workshops, internet-based shared research space, joint funding and a coordinated research design. Our collaborative process across continents is revealing the range of ways in which poverty is framed as an object of social regulation and governance (Foucault, 1980). Our comparative methodology takes into

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[4] However, rather than set up the US or the DC development apparatus as the sole objects of critique, we aim for empirically informed analyses that trace the multiplicities of power relations producing poverty in each place and in the connections between places.

account the connections between the particulars of each country as these are situated in structural relationships between places. In each country we compare: inequality trends; engagements with global economic flows and development interventions; colonially rooted racial hierarchies and class structures; narratives of national identity; the governance of poverty and social policy regimes; and the agenda-setting power of different social groups (elites, middle classes, social movements, subalterns). Our comparison is particularly attentive to similarities and differences in how middle class groups are constituted, how they are enrolled in these processes and how they engage or reject issues of poverty and social alliances.

But first, what do we mean by relational poverty analysis? To answer this, I must return to authoritative ideas about poverty.

AUTHORITATIVE POVERTY KNOWLEDGE

Dominant ideas about poverty obscure the root causes of poverty (O'Connor, 2001; Harriss, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Mosse, 2010). Authoritative poverty knowledge (both in the US and international development circles) continues to be defined primarily in terms of income and through a methodological individualism, wherein 'poor people' stand outside social relations (of class, gender, race and so on; Lawson and St. Clair, 2009). In these renditions, poverty is explained in terms of personal deficiencies; inappropriate or immoral behavior or as a result of insufficient engagement with markets (Schram, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Roy, 2010). Failing places are also made responsible for producing poverty through deficiencies of governance, corruption and/or an overall cultural disposition that is seen as preventing market forces taking hold or preventing people from engaging their (presumably inherent) entrepreneurial spirit. Poor places are framed as isolated, disconnected and inherently lacking the wherewithal (capital, free and functioning markets inter alia) to raise themselves out of poverty as expressed in the 2009 World Development Report (Lawson, 2010).

In these framings, poverty is viewed as a discrete ontological entity, a category, a benchmark, a place and/or a set of behaviors that set 'the poor' apart as discrete objects in need of reform and upon

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which policy-makers can act (Green, 2006; Hickey, 2009). The poor become an object of scrutiny that comes to be known through categorizing (poverty lines), counting (censuses, surveys), benchmarking (Millennium Development Goals) and quantitative analyses of poverty trends. Du Toit (2009: 225) refers to this as "…the 'econometric imaginary': an approach that frames questions of social understanding essentially as questions of measurement". These measurement practices categorize the poor as different from social norms (i.e. from middle classes) and scientific and policy work focuses on how to move this group over the poverty line with more capital, more health, more education and so on. This work depoliticizes poverty by obscuring the ways in which more powerful people benefit from the workings of capitalist markets and neoliberal governance as well from histories of unequal exchange and extraction that produce inequality and impoverishment. In short, authoritative poverty knowledge obscures structures of capitalism and the power of elites and middle classes.

This ontological separation of poverty from social relations remains remarkably robust, even as scholars advance innovative ideas about capabilities and social capital. Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2003) pioneered the capabilities approach to poverty, augmenting human rights arguments by focusing on the presence of capabilities to the achievement of full human potential. This normative approach focuses on translating rights into the policy sphere, "…articulating what people require in order to secure rights, and as such focuses more on positive action…" (Robinson, 2006: 10). These approaches have led to policies focused for example on access to education, health and improved environment in order to secure the right to livelihood and human flourishing. While laudable for expanding the terrain of poverty policy, these rights-based approaches to poverty remain focused on actions that allow individuals to strive for improved lives while ignoring social relations of difference and structural inequality that socially produce poverty through dispossession, adverse incorporation and through discourses that frame those named as poor as undeserving or fundamentally flawed (elaborated in the next section; Robinson, 2006; Jeffery, et.al., 2007).

Social capital approaches associate poverty with a lack of 'good' social capital (Putnam, 2000). In this optic, poverty is associated with a lack of social connections and networks and the absence of effective structures of participation in economic and social life such as customs, norms and communities of religious belief. This work frames local communities as inadequate, as characterized by a lack of trust, contacts and support systems. This approach has been widely taken up by both North American work on community development and international development in ways that focus primarily on the poor and champion local cultural and social interactions and institutions (Woolcock, 1998; Silverman, 2004). Much of this work focuses only on local communities, de-emphasizes structural dimensions of poverty and ignores cross-class alliances that are explicitly political or that are focused on making claims on capital or state institutions and actors (Rankin, 2002; Roy, 2010; Stoecker, 2004).

Even within what Roy (2003) terms 'millennial development's' globally populist concern with poverty, the focus remains on those defined as poor and in need of 'interventions' (benchmarked by the MDGs). Multiple constituencies including development scholars, non-governmental organizations, social movements and 'ordinary people' constitute the complex ensemble of actors within millennial development who are raising ethical concerns about market failure and 'global poverty' (Roy, 2010; Harriss, 2009). Despite substantial shifts in levels of awareness and globally populist concerns about poverty, dominant responses to poverty still focus on unleashing individual entrepreneurialism through microfinance, combating specific diseases, or opening borders in failing places so that increased migration and global market forces can stimulate economic growth (WDR, 2009).

GEOGRAPHICAL-RELATIONAL POVERTY

Our research responds to these ideological and ontological limits of authoritative poverty knowledge. We posit instead a relational analysis of poverty; arguing that people are poor because of powerful others (paraphrased from Wood, 2003:456 quoted in Mosse, 2010: 1158). Our relational theorization of poverty combines insights from three literatures. First, we build on a long tradition of Marxist and feminist geographical scholarship from David Harvey, Gillian Hart, David Slater, Dick

Peet, Jim Blaut, Doreen Massey and Michael Watts to theorize how poverty is produced through the exploitive and dispossessive effects of capital accumulation. Second, we draw from ontological critiques of poverty knowledge in development studies which point to processes of unequal categorization in the social production of poverty (David Mosse, Sam Hickey and Maia Green). Third, we draw on cultural studies and political theory to understand how politics and discourses consolidate material inequality and social categories in ways that shape the political voice of the poor (Mosse, 2010; Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Gramsci, 1992; Bourdieu, 1994; Schram, 2000; Pred and Watts, 1994).

Capital accumulation and impoverishment

Marxist and feminist researchers pioneered relational analyses of poverty in geography, tracing how material forces dispossess, exploit and exclude particular class fragments as these are fractured by gender, race, caste, nationality and space. This work highlights the social construction of poverty through both the devaluation of people and places under crisis and through adverse incorporation of people in specific sites of accumulation. Marxian research on poverty focuses on changes in economies and environments under post-colonization and uneven capitalist development that rework social relations and resource distributions (Watts, 1983; Slater, 1973; Harvey, 1982). Geographers trace the social production of spaces of accumulation (cities, agricultural regions, sites of mineral extraction) and their subsequent devaluation, focusing on the temporary-ness of fixed spatial coherences of resources, investments, labor markets, infrastructure, state policies, consumption practices; coupled with cultural systems of social reproduction (Harvey, 1985; Massey, 2005; Smith and Williams, 1986; Plummer and Sheppard, 2006). The globe is littered with spaces of impoverishment that were first transformed by capital accumulation and then subsequently devalued by economic restructuring. These are now spaces of deep poverty and social exclusion including vast expanses of ranchland and mining claims in Eastern Montana, industrial spaces of Southern Buenos Aires post 2001, and spaces of oil extraction and environmental devastation in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Much of this geographical work focuses on political and material struggles between elites and workers/peasantries with some attention to the rise of middle class spaces and identities but much less attention to middle class poverty politics. Of course for Marx, lower middle classes were the petit bourgeoisie (small capitalists) who he theorized as a conservative force, impeding revolutionary trajectory of capitalism (Eighteenth Brumaire)[5]. However, the complex range of middle class formations in the twenty-first century, poses new questions about their fragmentation and their political involvements with poverty.

Even as our discussions of relational poverty are deeply informed by Marxist theory, we avoid normalizing poverty as a principally economic phenomenon. We draw on ideas of adverse incorporation into specific capitalist space-economies which call attention to how people's livelihoods are shaped by their complex relations to states, markets, communities and institutions (Hickey and Du Toit, 2007). Specifically we trace the multidimensionality of exploitation and subordination, integrating gender, race, caste, citizenship with class relations (selected examples include Harriss-White, 2003; Kabeer, 1994; hooks, 2000; Katz, 2001). Feminist and anti-racist scholarship provides conceptual tools for advancing non-reductionist relational analyses of poverty, understanding capitalist social relations as always already constituted through multiple power processes (Spivak, 1990; hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 1991). Combining attention to middle class actors and multidimensional analyses of impoverishment has led our group to focus on geographically and historically specific capitalisms through which middle class poverty politics are constituted. These actually-existing capitalisms construct social divisions through multidimensional social relations that frame class position and identities.

For example, our comparative discussions of middle class poverty politics have focused on racial capitalism. 'Racial capitalism' refuses the idea of a pure capitalism that is external to racial formations; seeing actually-existing capitalism as taking shape through geo-historically specific cultural forms, norms and identities (Korstad, 2003; MacDonald, 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004). Our

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[5] I am indebted to Katharyn Mitchell for this insight.

discussions of racial capitalism shift class-centric discussions of poverty, and their underlying

economism, onto new theoretical ground. In this frame, poverty is produced through profoundly

racialized processes through which white privilege is intimately connected with economic power

(Pulido, 2000; Gilmore, 2007). Understanding poverty as always already a product of histories of racist

oppression, racial capitalism focuses analytical attention on the crucial roles of racism and white

privilege in processes of uneven development and adverse incorporation.

South Africa, Argentina, the US and Canada were all settler colonial economies, with long

histories of European immigration. From colonial times, race has been deployed as a tool of

oppression and/or governance and contemporary global economic relationships continue racialized

forms of dominance, even in the wake of national political shifts (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004). In

South Africa for example, MacDonald (2006: 178) describes the transition from apartheid to democracy

as a process in which

> "racial groups legitimate democratic government; democratic government affirms
> equality under the law, which eventually justifies economic inequality as the result of the
> free play of capitalism; and thus, state and capital confirm and materialize the
> importance of racial groups by applauding the black middle classes and nurturing black
> economic elites. The grounding of capitalism in democracy and democracy in racial
> nationalism contributes to one of the most striking features of post-apartheid South
> African politics. The political-economy remains stable and the ANC remains invincible,
> even though economic elites remain predominantly white and Africans remain mostly
> poor"

South Africa's overthrow of apartheid and the building of racial nationalism linked with free market

capitalism through democracy re-inscribes longstanding relations between whiteness and economic

privilege, even as these edges are blurring with the rise of black middle and elite classes. This example

focuses on race/class intersections but our discussions also pose questions about the ways in which

race/ethnicity/capital/religious/gender configurations in Argentina, the US, Thailand, Canada and

India shape middle classes and their relations to poverty; prompting more robustly relational analyses of

poverty.

Poor ontologies

Despite decisive insights from Marxist-feminist scholarship demonstrating the social production of poverty across the globe, this work is ignored or depoliticized in authoritative poverty knowledge (Mosse, 2010: 1161). This disconnect has much to do with the 'econometric imaginary' (Du Toit, 2009) of dominant poverty knowledge and its laser-like focus on issues of measurement rather than social relations. As Sam Hickey (2009: 2) puts it,

> "… [authoritative poverty knowledge] needs to be engaged at the levels of ontology and ideology and not simply in terms of the more limited methodological advances that have [not]… transformed the frontiers of poverty knowledge"

To confront the ontological limits of dominant poverty knowledge, we link materialist analyses of poverty with ontological discussions of social ordering: processes of unequal categorization through which societies make inequality palatable (Mosse, 2010; Tilly, 1998; Green, 2009; Hickey, 2009; Du Toit, 2009). Processes of social ordering are not merely determined by capitalism and we theorize them separately to foreground the diverse ways in which social categories allocate entitlements that determine wellbeing or harms (Green, 2009). People's very survival can be shaped by socially and institutionally sanctioned positions within relationships of kin, gender, race, caste, class, community and citizenship. We critique the ways in which authoritative poverty knowledge rests upon and reinscribes categorical separations of 'poor' from 'non-poor' in ways that justify political-economic inequality, institutional arrangements and identities to powerful effect:

> "Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize people, practices…they are *tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality*" (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168 emphasis mine)

Our relational analysis of poverty focuses on how social categories of 'poor' as distinct from 'non-poor' are produced by versions of 'reality' that make sense of poverty by creating symbolic boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (by caste, class, gender, age, citizenship, need, entitlement, etc). In turn these very boundaries serve as a political justification for why access to material resources and political voice can be hoarded, protected and rationed (Tilly, 1998). These symbolic boundaries are solidified by group performances of identity that draw on cultural tastes and lifestyles as well as moral

boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont, 1992).   The performance of cultural and moral distinction

reproduces class privilege as elites and middle classes, "…use their legitimate culture …to monopolize

privileges, and to exclude and recruit new occupants to high status positions" (quoted in Lamont and

Molnar, 2002: 172). Categories are solidified through practices of consumption and class performance,

coupled with discourses that other the poor as dangerous or undeserving, or that situate certain people

outside of social obligations by family, community or the state.

The processes through which social and symbolic boundaries are solidified or reordered have

crucial political effects for those named as poor. One example of social reordering is the practice of

'witch othering' in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ciekawy, 1998; Green, 2009; Colson, 2000; Neihaus, 2005).

Witch accusations have been on the rise and in this process of re-categorization, family members or

familiar neighbors are converted into excluded others; which reduces their entitlements to care and

support. Another enduring social categorization; of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving poor' in political

discourse in rich countries has a long history of being solidified through policy practices such as the

current rules for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) in the US welfare system (i.e.

income below poverty line, being a parent, actively job-seeking). In India caste distinctions construct

Dalits as ritually impure, producing unequal social categories. Even after many years of working and

living in cities in close proximity with a diversity of urban residents, Dalit workers remain concentrated

in poorly paid, low status jobs in janitorial, waste removal or scavenging work (Mosse, 2010: 1162).

While these sociological and anthropological theorizations of social categories and boundaries

are immensely useful, we extend this line of thinking by arguing that these ontological categories are re-

inscribed or disrupted through moments of interaction that are often spatial. Our project investigates

'zones of encounter' (Valentine, 2008) or shared spaces in which performances of identity or moments

of social alliance are activated. For example, our empirical project on middle class poverty politics

focuses on points of contact and negotiation between groups such as encounters around urban

residential space and institutionalized interactions around service provision such as education or social

services. We anticipate that these sites will reveal dynamic struggles over 'social reality' as groups struggle over alternative systems of classification with varied effects from the political (de)mobilization of those named as poor to social alliances.

Cultural and political constructions of poor others

The third element of our relational poverty approach explores the political roles of middle classes in producing/countering hegemonic discourses that consolidate unequal social categories and limit political voice of the poor. Gramsci (1992) provides invaluable conceptual tools for us. He refuses the idea that specific classes hold a-priori ideological positions and argues instead that 'inter class subjects' are created in geographically specific processes of building hegemony (Hart, 2011). The organic ideology that emerges is a "…complex ensemble whose contents can never be determined in advance since it depends on a whole series of historical and national factors … in the struggle for hegemony." Mouffe (1979: 193). [6] Gramsci resists class reductionism (the idea that class position predetermines ideology) but he nonetheless focuses on the 'fundamental classes' either 'organic intellectuals' (working men of the street) or 'traditional intellectuals' those belonging to the bourgeoisie (i.e. the dominant class of the current mode of production; Mouffe, 1979: 186). His lack of attention to middle classes can be explained by the historical conditions of Gramsci's Italy. We investigate how the substantial, complex middle classes as we encounter them in the 21st century are articulated into political projects around poverty. Our own framing of 'middle classness' takes seriously Gramsci's emphasis on conjunctural geo-histories and relations of forces (see also Glassman, 2011). Our project explores race/ethnicity, national identity and fear/security as crucial fault lines along which middle class identities and poverty politics are negotiated.

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[6] Gramsci's concept of hegemony, as an indissoluble blend of political, intellectual and moral leadership, informs our investigation of where, when under what circumstances middle class actors maintain or challenge dominant ideas about poverty (Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). Gramsci focuses our attention on 'organic intellectuals' – those who articulate a common world view, grounded in everyday experience, which forms the basis for a collective will that shapes political leadership (Mouffe, 1979: 184; Gramsci, 1992).

For example, our discussions of relational poverty focus on the political importance of projects of socio-spatial ordering and boundary-making. Nation-building is one such project that articulates particular social, symbolic and material boundaries of middle class-ness in each country. We consider the ways in which ideas of national belonging are framed through race/ethnicity, class, modernity and morality (Adamovsky, 2009; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004; Murillo, 2008). Within post WWII development discourse, poverty has played a central role as the problem to be managed and defeated (Escobar, 1995). Many states across the Majority World engaged developmentalism as a logic of governance, framing modernization and national becoming through narratives of upward social mobility. In many places, middle class-ness is an emblem of becoming modern and the antithesis of poverty.

In Argentina 'middle class' is invoked to claim respectability in relation to projects of nation-building and constructions of the 'modern urban citizen'. In Argentina being middle class has historically involved a claim to European ancestry and whiteness (Adamovsky, 2009). After 1946 middle class identity was forged in new ways under Peronism in relation to the central figure of 'the worker'. In 1983 when democracy was established, middle class pride was mobilized to oppose pro-worker, pro-state policies which were framed as part of the past. As this construction of middle class identity gains strength it weakens political solidarity between middle classes and lower social groups.

Murillo (2008) argues that discourses of fear and insecurity, rooted in memories of terror and death operate to naturalize inequality between city dwellers in Buenos Aires. This discursive strategy has been consolidating since the 1970s and more intensely since structural adjustment reforms of the 90s. A turn towards free market economic and political philosophy "…distinguishes an 'us' and an 'otherness', quietly installed from experiences of insecurity" (Murillo et.al., 2010). In this sense, ideas of middle class-ness have become a strategy of governance through the mobilization of a white, national and fearful identity. Notwithstanding these strategies, Adamovsky (2009) finds that some in the middle classes are building solidarity with poorer sectors with the rise of the 'new poor': a group

that sees themselves as middle class even though they are objectively poor (Minujin, 1995; Lopez, 2006).[7] This class position results in confusion, creating doubt among middle class actors that being poor is associated with laziness, irrational behavior and immorality. These 'new poor' see themselves as closer to the lower class and are less likely to blame them for their own poverty. In Argentina, resistance to neoliberal policies in the 1990s and widespread social alliance post the 2001 economic crash are moments of political solidarity, even in a cultural landscape traditionally marked by tensions or outright hostility between middle classes and the poor.

A RESEARCH AGENDA ON MIDDLE CLASS POVERTY POLITICS

Our relational analysis of poverty emphasizes the crucial role of the non-poor (for us middle class actors) in the production, maintenance and management of the 'poverty object'. We argue that poverty is reproduced both materially and discursively through processes of dispossession and adverse incorporation into capitalist space-economies, through socio-spatial categorizations and political boundary-making. These combined insights frame our relational comparison that seeks to uncover where, through what mechanisms and under what circumstances middle classes act in solidarity with, or in opposition to the poor. We are in the first of two phases of our collaboration. Phase one developed our research agenda focusing upon middle class poverty politics within a relational poverty framework (Appendix A describes membership of our group and workshops convened). The second phase is our empirical research which we are currently building out.

Our project begins from the idea that middle classes can be important actors in their own right, rather than only supporting the hegemony of either 'fundamental class' (elites or lower classes). The poverty politics of middle class actors are not a foregone conclusion, but rather "…it is necessary to explain the actual practices through which [the middle class] differentiates itself from other classes and through which its internal fractions are defined" (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 499). Much research has

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[7] In Argentina in 1980 47.4% of the population were categorized as middle class by their employment characteristics, by 1991 the percentage shrank to 38%, a dramatic reduction in one decade (Adamovsky, 2009).

explored middle class defensive strategies through which people struggle for distinction from poor others to maintain control over cultural and political resources, especially during times of crisis (Schram, 2000; Goode and Maskovsky, 2001; Cohen, 2004; Lawson, Jarosz and Bonds, 2010). However, scholars have also identified alliances of middle class groups with lower middle class or subalterns (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Luebbert, 1991; Polanyi, 1944; Jeffrey, 2010).[8]

Our methodological strategy explores the possibilities for diverse and sometimes surprising instances of political alliance as well as ongoing social polarization by focusing on moments of capitalist crisis. We theorize crises as crucial periods of struggle over social categories and boundaries that remake or solidify class distinctions; including who the poor are, why they are poor, how poverty should be addressed. Each case study country has experienced crisis and social reordering in recent decades and we organize our research around these moments: South Africa the 1994 transition and its aftermath; Argentina the 2001 economic crisis; Thailand the 1997 Asian Financial crisis; and the strikingly different experiences of the 2008 financial crisis in the US and Canada.[9]

Why capitalist crisis and middle classes?

"Hatred of the poor is fueled by the middle class's fear of falling during hard times"
(Wray quoted in Lubrano, 2010)

We focus on moments of capitalist crisis because these periods of dramatic restructuring intensify material inequality and discursive boundary-making and specifically, debates over poverty. For example, in the wake of the Great Recession in the US, a Kentucky lawmaker introduced a bill that would enforce random drug-testing for all adult Kentuckians receiving welfare, food stamps or Medicaid (Bassett, 2011). This move links drug abuse to welfare receipt, reinforcing the boundary between 'decent people' and 'drug abusers', and by extension, 'welfare abusers'. A Salvation Army report in Canada post-recession, finds that "one in four believe people are poor because they're lazy"

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[8] Some of this work has found that these alliances may concern the protection of privilege through incorporation to avoid more radical reforms (Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Luebbert, 1991).
[9] We recognize the very different temporalities of crisis in each country, some being abrupt moments and others more long-term or slow-burning periods of political/economic crisis. We investigate the ways in which these distinct forms of crisis shape the social construction of poverty. I am indebted to Stephen Young for clarifying this point.

(Proudfoot, 2011). At the same time, this report also found 89% of Canadians agree that people in poverty deserve a helping hand and 81% say helping poor families sets their children up for success. These findings suggest the potential for progressive alliances between social groups in Canada. In South Africa, gated communities are on the rise as wealthy, predominantly white elites build securitized spaces in response to blurring of race and status boundaries and in response to fears of criminal, poor others: building electrified walls, hiring security staff and even working to remove adjacent black/poor settlements (Lemanski, 2006; Dugger, 2010; Hook and Vrdoljak, 2002).

Since the 1970s all our study countries have experienced severe financial crises, political instability, intense job losses, spiraling energy and food costs and/or defaults on housing and consumer debts (Schram, 2000; Birdsall et.al., 2000). These crises have exhibited different temporalities in each country, with sudden moments defined by debt, terrorist attacks, military coups or natural disasters or slow-burning crises linked to neoliberal restructuring of markets and governance. Whatever the form, crises become moments of radical social and economic engineering (Klein, 2007; Harvey, 2005: 19). Both Klein and Harvey trace the ways in which these projects of recreation in places as different as Argentina, South Africa, Bolivia, Poland, Chile and the U.S. have reduced the power of labor unions, informal producers, peasant farmers and other groups fighting for social justice while consolidating corporate power. Rather than seeing disasters as moments of social leveling, Klein (2007: 522) argues that "…they provide windows into a cruel and ruthlessly divided future in which money and race buy survival". Her detailed histories of disaster capitalism compellingly trace growing privilege of white corporate elites hand in glove with deepening impoverishment.

There is certainly evidence of growing poverty and income polarization in our study countries. In 2006, five years after the financial crisis of 2001, 26% of Argentineans were in poverty as compared with 4% in 1974. In 2005, a decade after the transition to majority rule, 48% of South African households were below the poverty level; and even more starkly 61% of black citizens live below the poverty line (Kalati and Manor, 2005). Thailand has a relatively low national poverty rate at 14%, but

exhibits vast urban/rural disparities in poverty, ranging from 2% in poverty in Bangkok to 24% of rural residents in the Northeastern region (Hickey, 2010). In the U.S. poverty is often ignored despite the fact that the numbers of poor and near poor are staggering at over 44 million (14.3%) in 2009 (as compared with 25 million persons, 11.6% in 1979) and with continuing enormous racial inequalities in poverty with 26% of African-Americans poor in 2009 alongside 33% of Native-Americans (Bishaw and Macartney, 2010; US Census, Consumer Income Reports). With inequality now again approaching its historic high point in the US, 40% of wealth is held by the richest 1% (Economist, 2006) and poverty is obscured by a political discourse focused on middle class vulnerability and need (e.g. Obama Administration's middle class task force).

Inequality is growing not only due to increasing poverty, but because wealth is shifting from middle groups to the rich (Krugman, 2002). Pressman's (2007) study of eleven rich countries (including the US and Canada) between 1980 and 2000 found strong evidence of middle income declines because households are falling into the lower classes, rather than moving upwards through social mobility. In South Africa, income inequality is startling; rivaling the worst in the world. Since the end of apartheid, government policies to redress unequal job and investment opportunities expanded a nascent black middle class that was emerging in apartheid's townships, ready to benefit from new freedoms under post-apartheid reforms (Hart, 2007; Ballard, 2004). Notwithstanding the politics of social inclusion that drove the transition, the priority placed on market-led growth by the ANC government perpetuated inequality (Bond, 1998). By 2005 the top 10% of households in South Africa earn 50% of total income while just under half the population earn only 11% of total income (Kalati and Manor, 2005: 158). In Argentina, the decline of previously middle income families into poverty over the last three decades has been stunning. In 1974, the middle classes broadly defined, included 74% of urban population and this crashed to 29% by 2006 (Lopez, 2006; Minujin, 1995). This new poverty in Argentina is essentially ignored.

"New poverty is diffuse, scattered throughout the big cities. Unlike the old poor, the "new poor" do not live in easily recognizable neighborhoods or enclaves. They can be found in just about any middle-class neighborhood or apartment block. This is private poverty, hidden behind closed doors" (Minujin, 1995: 163)

In Thailand, the 1997 financial crisis also dealt a strong blow to the growing middle classes and fueled a period of intense political crisis that has weakened civil society alliances between progressive factions of the middle class and the poor, such as the Assembly of the Poor (Hickey, 2010). This evidence of increasing economic liberalization coupled with deepening, already sharp inequalities within countries (Birdsall, et. al. 2000) suggests that middle income groups are shrinking (see also Newman, 1999).

Evidence of the disappearing middle and the rise of 'new poor' and 'nouveau riche' in many countries, raises urgent questions about middle class involvements with poverty. While these data provide only a limited window onto economic dimensions of crisis in each country, they are suggestive of social and economic fragmentation/polarization. Our project examines whether there can be more to the story of crisis/disaster capitalism than ongoing, seemingly inevitable social polarization? While our case studies will undoubtedly reveal ongoing impoverishment and social fragmentation, we will explore evidence of social alliances between middle and poorer strata as well. As I noted at the outset, those identifying as middle class, have in certain places and times, exercised substantial agency in support of widespread social protections in Global Northern democratic states during periods of crisis. These middle groups can be key actors in articulating social and political agendas that are often inclusive of those above (elites) and those below (workers, vulnerable groups) (Kildal and Kuhnle, 2005; O'Connor, 2001). In Argentina new moments of social solidarity between middle and poorer sectors emerged in the wake of the 2001 crisis, including community kitchens, neighborhood assemblies (with community vegetable gardens, community banks, clinics and schooling) and the national movement for worker-owned cooperatives which took over more than 200 businesses across the country. In Seattle in 1999 a broad-based social uprising at the World Trade Organization ministerial inspired the World Social Forum, a movement of movements that united people around the

world against pro-corporate neoliberal globalization. In UP India, Jeffrey (2010) finds cross class alliances between Jat young men, poor Dalits and Muslim students as they engage in coordinated protests against the local state over the costs of education, student harassment and corruption. We explore where, when and under what circumstances these progressive alliances around impoverishment emerge.

CONCLUSIONS

Our project calls for renewed attention to a relational analysis of poverty that takes seriously the relations between geographies of adverse incorporation into capitalist space-economies, unequal socio-spatial categorization and the cultural politics of poverty. We focus on the non-poor and specifically middle class-ness, in order to understand the construction of 'poor others' that circulates in politics and policy. We view 'middle class' as a boundary object around which there is contestation and fluidity across time and place. Our work is collaborative, international and comparative in order to allow our theorizations and empirical findings to travel in provocative ways across our case studies; supporting, challenging or rendering unusual insights emerging elsewhere. We ask what are the implications of particular geo-historically specific constructions of middle class-ness and how do they produce those named as poor? How are these socio-spatial boundaries navigated and what agency do those named as 'middle classes' exert to politicize poverty?

We view space and long-sedimented histories as central to understanding the social construction of poverty and our empirical work will focus on 'zones of encounter' (Valentine, 2008) between groups in residential neighborhoods, in schools and in organizations/institutions addressing poverty (non-profits, charities, local government, activist community). Understanding moments of cross class alliance can serve to break apart categorical exclusions, can challenge othering representations and can work against the political demobilization of those named as poor. In making this call we join with Valentine (2008: 335) to call for

"…a rematerialization and resocialization of human geography: a return to focusing on socio-spatial inequalities and the insecurities they breed, and to trying to understand the complex and intersecting ways in which power operates."

Our collaboration across disciplines and places has changed our ideas by learning from each other. Processes of unequal categorization, adverse incorporation and the politics of difference and solidarity take on very different forms under South African and US racialized capitalism. Projects of nation-building and governance and of terror, fear, memory and security take on different forms in the US and Argentina producing very different class politics. What has remained constant in our discussions has been a commitment to research interrogating middle class agency in relation to poverty. We are committed to a research agenda that unsettles authoritative poverty knowledge and that foregrounds the social construction of poverty.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Appendix A: Participants in Middle Class Poverty Politics Workshops

Solstrand Fjord Hotel (Bergen-Norway), January 2010
Conveners: Victoria Lawson, University of Washington and Asuncion St. Clair, University of Bergen

ADAMOVSKI, Ezequiel, Argentina, Associate professor, faculty of humanities, University of Buenos Aries.

ADESINA, Jimi, South Africa, Professor of Sociology, Rhodes University and External Research Coordinator of the UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) Project 'Social Policy in sub-Saharan Africa.'.

BALLARD, Richard, South Africa, Professor and Academic c-Coordinator, Development Studies, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban

COHEN, Shana, United States and United Kingdom, Lecturer in Sociology and Senior Research Fellow in Social Policy and Social Care, Sheffield University.

COMAROFF, Jean, South Africa, Professor of Anthropology, University of Chicago.

ELWOOD, Sarah, United States, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

FLØTTEN, Tone, Norway, Research Director at the Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Oslo.

JAROSZ, Lucy, United States, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

JENSEN, Leif, United States, Professor of Rural Sociology and Demography, Pennsylvania State University.

KORSNES, Olav, Norway, Professor of Sociology, University of Bergen.

KRAMER, Monique, the Netherlands, Professor, Dutch Scientific Council.

LAWSON, Victoria, United Kingdom and United States, Professor of Geography and Convener of the Critical Global Poverty Studies Group, University of Washington, Seattle.

MURILLO, Susana, Argentina, Professor at Gino Germany Institute of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires.

ST. CLAIR, Asuncion, Norway and Spain, Associate Professor of Sociology, Scientific Director of CROP (Comparative Research on Poverty Network) University of Bergen.

WAERNESS, Kari, Norway, Professor Department of Sociology, University of Bergen.

WILSON, David, United States, Professor of Geography, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Centro de Cooperacion Cultural, Buenos Aires, Argentina September 2010
Convener: Victoria Lawson, University of Washington

ADAMOVSKI, Ezequiel, Argentina, Associate professor, faculty of humanities, University of Buenos Aries.

AGUILAR, Paula, Argentina, graduate student, social sciences, University of Buenos Aires.

ALGRANATI, Clara, Argentina, graduate student, social sciences, University of Buenos Aires.

AUFSEESER, Dena, United States, graduate student, geography, University of Washington

BORON, Atilio, Argentina, Professor of Political Theory, University of Buenos Aires.

BURNETT, Rebecca, United States, graduate student, geography, University of Washington

CANEVARO, Santiago, Argentina, anthropology, Phd researcher, University of Buenos Aires.

CIMADAMORE, Alberto, Argentina, Professor of Political Science, University of Buenos Aires.

ELWOOD, Sarah, United States, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

FARIAS, Monica, Argentina, graduate student, geography, University of Washington

GRONDONA, Ana, Argentina, graduate student, social sciences, Univesity of Buenos Aires.

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SEOANE, Jose, Argentina, Phd researcher, social sciences, University of Buenos Aires.

VIOTTI, Nicolas, Argentina, graduate student, sociology, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro

Department of Geography, University of Washington, December 2010
Conveners: Sarah Elwood and Lucy Jarosz

ELWOOD, Sarah, United States, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

JAROSZ, Lucy, United States, Associate Professor of Geography, University of Washington, Seattle.

MCCANN, Eugene, Canada, geography, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC.

MIEWALD, Christiana, Canada, Center for Sustainable Community Development, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC

Department of Geography, University of Washington, January, 2011
Conveners: Victoria Lawson and Lucy Jarosz

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