

Michael Pickering

Celine-Marie Pascale (ed.), "Social Inequality and the Politics of Representation". Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage, 2013, 368 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/73719)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2013

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Book reviews

Celine-Marie Pascale (ed.), *Social Inequality and the Politics of Representation*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC: Sage, 2013, 368 pp.

doi: 10.2383/73719

One of the most impressive aspects of this collection is its scope and range. It covers inequalities in twenty countries across five continents, and so effectively displaces the usual sociological focus on Europe or North America while also avoiding a centre/periphery approach. This is very welcome, and does move us towards a broader understanding of the representation and reproduction of inequalities on a global scale. It also means that the contributors can attend to the representational practices involved in constructing the meanings of inequalities both within and between particular national boundaries, and across the various categories of nationality, race, social class, gender and sexuality. The book is organised around these categories, with a section devoted to each of them.

The first section on class begins with a chapter on the stigmatization of poverty and the people who suffer it. Those who are in privileged positions in the social structure are prone to asserting that contemporary societies in the West are classless, and that those at the bottom are there because of their own individual failings and deficiencies, such as lack of ambition and drive. The media are generally complicit in this notion that “we are all middle-class now,” with the only exceptions being an old working-class rump who are feckless, workshy, welfare-dependent and inclined to criminality. Martin Power, Eoin Devereux and Amanda Haynes focus on media coverage of the socially deprived Moyross housing estate in Limerick, in southwest Ireland, and show that this hegemonic discourse works not only to maintain the myth of classlessness but also to justify, in times of austerity, drastic cuts in public spending. Such cuts most affect those who are socially most vulnerable, the so-called “underclass.” While this derogatory term, popularised by the conservative political scientist Charles Murray, has figured as a key focus of media commentary on welfare, crime and disorder, it is often specific subgroups which have been marked out as the targets of media panics, single working-class mothers being a prominent example of those who are negatively stereotyped in such panics. The stereotypical “othering” of such groups also affect the places where they live, and the negative reputations then acquired by such places further corrode the life chances and self-image of their inhabitants. Places become stigmatized, in ways it is very difficult to reverse. In a methodologically rigorous study, Power, Devereux and Haynes show this to be the case with Moyross, with 70% of the print media articles on the estate being about crime. As they put it in their conclusion, the continual pathologising of places like Moyross “have tangible impacts on the current living conditions and future possibilities” of their residents [p. 15].

If this is sociologically the most sustained chapter in this initial section, the other chapters offer interesting work on representations of social class elsewhere in the world. They reveal the occurrence of indigenous language discrimination and its connection with living in poverty in Mexico; provide critical discourse analysis of an article in the *Correio Braziliense* about a 57-year-old homeless man, showing how the text naturalizes

the presence of severe poverty in Brazil while also concealing serious issues concerning social inequality; and examine race/class intersections in shows involving callers to South African radio stations, these yielding data on common-sense knowledge of class and race which demonstrate the existence of both continuities and discontinuities between the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. This last chapter creates a neat bridge to the next section on race, which begins with a critical analysis by Nataša Simeunovi# Baji# on representation of the Roma minority in the Serbian press. The contemporary sensation-alist reproduction of their assigned status as ethnically and culturally Other, within an 'us'/'them' discourse, involves the common stereotype of Roma people as dirty, criminal, uncultured. They are posed as a threat to social order and considered entirely responsible for their own low social position. The long-established continuity in this construction of Roma otherness is made clear by the important historical perspective which is offered in this chapter. Other chapters deal with the politics of race-baiting in interviews with the conservative television commentator, Lou Dobbs; place-naming as a form of political action; and issues of identity and diaspora among Indian men living in post-Amin Uganda.

There are some interesting examinations of representations of sexuality in the book. These include queer cultural politics and the creation of disparate publics in Germany, two prominent asylum cases involving a lesbian and a gay man, and same-gender desire among teenagers in South Korea, but the most absorbing chapter for me is Sanya Osha's deconstruction of regimes of sexuality in Nigeria. This is a tall order in light of the ethnic, linguistic and religious complexity of Nigerian society, and Osha tackles it by distinguishing between different sexual orders and sexual politics in different regions of Nigeria. He takes the colonial legacy into account, and highlights the crisis of phal-locentric systems in the context of contemporary globalization. Despite this crisis, old forms of social control and sexual regulation fight back, in greater or lesser degree, as for instance with the reaffirmation of Sharia law in northern Nigeria. Particular lines of power oppress women in quite dissimilar ways, and these can be traced back to the manner in which colonial, Christian and Islamic discourses took root and developed in different areas of the country.

Islam does not only need to be taken account of in the relations of power that have developed in countries like Nigeria, for there is also a need to tackle the ways in which Islamic religious practices are accounted for in the West. In line with this, Ricarda Drüeke, Susanne Kirchhoff and Elisabeth Klaus devote their chapter to media representations of religious veiling by Muslim women in Austrian press photography. The practice of veiling clashes with the defining tenet of feminism that women should be free to control their own bodies. Drüeke, Kirchhoff and Klaus argue that, because the headscarf signifies low social status in the Austrian context, it is only by creating liminal spaces, spaces of in-betweenness, that the veiled woman can acquire any agency and voice. Kjerstin Andersson examines contemporary constructions of masculinity, race and violence in Sweden, looking in particular at how ethnic identities intersect with age and gender, and how masculine ethnic or racist identity is constructed through the resource of "fight stories." Ebru Sungun has a chapter on the Turkish effort to eradicate the Kurdish language and destroy Kurdish culture which in part involved a particular style of education for Kurdish girls, while Caesar De Alwis, Maya Khemlani David and Francisco Perlas Dumanig attend to the development of their own language among transgendered

people in Malaysia, this serving as a means of resisting the discrimination facing them under Islamic law.

Nadezhda Georgieva-Stankova's focus is also on language and identity, but in relation to blogs about the popular genre of Turkish soap operas in Bulgaria. These provide ground for challenging existing ethnic prejudices and stereotypes. It would seem that, as Georgieva-Stankova puts it, "the shared Ottoman past is being reconsidered in a more positive way as a period of mutual exchange and enrichment", and that this "emphasises the nodal points of commonality rather than difference and hostility, and potentially leads to a new post-national treatment of both ethnicity and nationhood" [p. 272]. The theme of nation also runs through chapters dealing with the continuing struggle between internet users and government censors in China, public efforts to shape collective memory with regard to Argentina's Dirty War, and in Russia the discursive construction of orphans and what it means to be defined as such across three key historical moments: the October Revolution and Civil War (1920-1926), the Great Patriotic War (1941-45), and Perestroika (2002-2005, 2008-2009).

If the general sweep of this book is commendable, the strength of analysis and argument across the twenty chapters is variable, and I have perhaps already suggested this by dwelling more on what have seemed to me to be the most able and compelling. Such variability creates a patchwork quality to the book as a whole, though this is almost inevitable in a collection which covers such a wide range of topics and is also methodologically and analytically diverse. The focus on language and representation helps create a degree of unifying focus, and this is complemented and augmented by the other major preoccupation with social inequalities as these are manifested across the key categories of gender and sexuality, nation, race and social class. The book occupies a fertile place midway between sociology and cultural studies, and places scholarship from around the world on an equal footing. It is in the end this round-the-world scope of the book that remains its most appealing feature, and turns its abundance of topic and treatment into a worthwhile sociological project.

Michael Pickering
Loughborough University