

'Policing the Neoliberal Crisis': An Introduction to my PhD Research

This article utilises the theoretical insights of Stuart Hall to explore how the logic neoliberal elites have seized upon the current economic crisis to legitimise their power and the importance of engaging in strategies of contestation.

How can it be justified that the way to respond to a problem is to extend and deepen the cause? In Britain, and elsewhere, the neoliberal crisis of capitalism has been seized and capitalised upon by neoliberal elites who have used the opportunity presented as a mechanism to strengthen neoliberal ideology and discourse. How have elites attempted to 'legitimise' their actions? In what ways have political and financial elites constructed and narrated the 'crisis' in order to police the neoliberal crisis?

A key tool of the elite, for 'policing' the neoliberal crisis, has been to socially and politically construct a 'social crisis', 'a crisis of Britain's morality'. To draw on one of the seminal contributions to the debate, made by Stanley Cohen (1972) in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, in order to cultivate the perception of a 'social crisis' political elites have constructed and narrated a 'moral panic', which has at its centre the 'folk devil' of the 'scrounger'. As Young (2007: 178) suggested, the 'experts', construct discourses that separate 'them' from 'us' and 'we' reject 'them'. The narration of the 'social crisis' has served to direct blame towards the poor and 'legitimise' the punitive measures taken to address *their* 'culpability'.

The neoliberal crisis of capitalism was caused by the actions and omissions of neoliberal political and financial elites who yield great power and financial wealth. However the elite have continued to enjoy a culture of impunity and have been rewarded for their actions whilst the poorest have suffered great harm, injustice and insecurity. We have witnessed an inversion of the traditional 'offender'/ 'victim' dichotomy. The elite 'offenders' have been protected whilst the 'victims' of the crisis have endured increasingly punitive measures, which have been described by Loic Wacquant (2009) in a US context as a 'war on the poor'. Through the narration of the crisis, the neoliberal narrative has reframed 'fairness' to 'legitimise' unjust 'responses'.

In a social democratic context, 'benefits' were framed as a positive attribute for the collective and connoted notions of wellbeing and protection. However, neoliberal political elites have discursively reconstructed and denigrated 'benefits' to reframe them as a luxury exploited by the shameful dependency of the idle. The neoliberal reframing of 'benefits' has served to 'legitimise' the neoliberal attack on the resources of the poor. The Coalition government's 'Help to Work' programme introduced in April 2014 is an example of the 'responses' that the crisis narration has 'legitimised'. The programme requires the long-term unemployed to undertake community work, including picking up litter and cleaning graffiti, to *earn* their welfare 'benefits'. The blame for the high levels of unemployment has been shifted from the state and the economic system it aggressively promotes, to the unemployed, who are being held accountable for 'problems' they have not caused. Being forced to carry

out unpaid work is a punishment administered by the state against the 'criminal'. There is a blurring of boundaries between the 'unemployed' and the 'criminal'; the social system is mirroring the criminal system. Whilst there are issues raised with regards to the 'criminal' being punished through the undertaking of unpaid work, the question of how political elites justify treating the unemployed in the same way as the 'criminal' must also be raised.

As a volunteer for the Citizens Advice Bureau, I witnessed vulnerable populations being forced into greater precariousness and the emergence of an increasingly punitive 'welfare' system. I was based in an area where there was a shortfall in local authority housing, particularly one and two bedroomed properties. Therefore, when the 'bedroom tax' was introduced, many people living in the area were affected by the harmful policy and turned to the bureau for advice and support. They were presented with five 'options':

1. Apply to the local authority for a discretionary housing payment (however, this was predominantly for disabled people)
2. Move to a smaller property (however, given the limited housing in the area, for most people this was not an option)
3. Rent a property from a private landlord (however, these properties are more expensive and therefore unaffordable for most)
4. Work more (but the area suffers from high levels of unemployment)
5. Stay in the property and accept advice on debt management (a short term 'solution')

The prospect of homelessness or debt left many anxious and in despair. However, the majority of victims of the 'bedroom tax' and other changes to welfare 'benefits' chose not to engage in social policy campaigning. Three explanations were often given for this. One explanation was that they felt there was no point because it would not change anything; there was a feeling of powerlessness in comparison to the system. A second justification was that if others, predominantly immigrants, had not been 'scrounging' off the system, the changes would not be happening; this demonstrates a fragmentation between benefit claimants and the recruitment of victims into the narrative of blaming 'the other'. Thirdly, a justification for not campaigning was that they felt that it was their fault because they were not 'hardworking taxpayers'; benefit claimants were blaming themselves. This suggests that the process of interpellation has been successful in recruiting members of the public, including members of social groups that have suffered great harm and injustice, to the dominant 'crisis' narrative informed by a neoliberal ideological agenda.

Gilbert's (2013: 18) theorisation of 'disaffected consent' explains that despite dissatisfaction with neoliberal elite agendas and the social harm they cause, social groups passively accept the ideology because there is no alternative to politically challenge neoliberalism. This deep dissatisfaction but acceptance permeates much wider than victims of welfare 'benefit' changes; other social groups have suffered but are not challenging neoliberalism. The overarching concern of my PhD research is 'what are neoliberal elites saying and writing in order to prevent neoliberal ideology from being challenged?' 'How have elites

constructed and narrated the 'crisis of capitalism' in order to legitimise neoliberalism?'

When the 'crisis of capitalism' began, an opportunity was presented. However, in order for that opportunity to have been used to challenge neoliberalism, as Harvey (2011: 227) states, an 'oppositional movement' and an 'alternative vision' was necessary. Whilst there may be alternative visions, the spreading of such visions across society is limited due to a lack of power, which in turn means a lack of access to means of dissemination. The dominance of neoliberalism and its hegemonic status means that many social groups cannot consider an alternative: therefore a powerful oppositional movement does not currently exist.

As a growing number of criminologists have argued, theorists should expand the criminological imagination, erode disciplinary boundaries and be concerned with the greatest harms and injustices. The manipulations of the neoliberal crisis of capitalism and the 'responses', 'legitimised' by the narration of the 'crisis', have inflicted incalculable harms and injustices. Therefore, as criminologists we should be contributing to the alternative vision, disseminating the vision and supporting an oppositional movement.

In *Policing the Crisis* Hall et al (1978) provided a seminal contribution in their analysis of the narration of the 1970s crisis of capitalism. I seek to draw on this analysis in my own research. I am undertaking an analysis of elite discursive constructions and narration of the neoliberal crisis of capitalism, between 2007 and 2015 in Britain. I am critically analysing a range of publicly available oral and written discourse by political and financial elites and their institutions including: political party conference speeches and manifestoes, key Prime Minister's questions, speeches by the Governor of the Bank of England and evidence to, and reports by, the Treasury Committee. I am analysing the discourses constructed to politically and socially construct the 'crisis', the discourses constructed to narrate the 'responses', the interests that have been supported through the elite constructions and narrations and the relationships that have underpinned the ways the 'crisis' has been manipulated. In order to challenge something, you need to analyse the mechanisms through which it operates, its strengths, contradictions and weaknesses. My research will analyse the ways discursive construction and narration of the neoliberal crisis has served to protect and deepen the neoliberal ideology. Through conducting and disseminating my PhD research, I intend to contribute towards the challenging of neoliberalism.

References

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Biography

Holly White is a funded PhD student and Graduate Teaching Assistant in Criminology at Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, Lancashire. Holly's research interests are informed by a concern for the impact of neoliberalism on a wide range of issues and she has a particular interest in the victimisation of the poor through policy responses legitimised by neoliberal discourses. Holly will be presenting a paper at the 2014 European Group conference that will analyse political and media discourses to discuss the stages of the denigration of benefit recipients in Britain.

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