

Social Inequalities in the Post-Brexit Era

An Interview with Mike Savage

By Nicolas Duvoux

A prominent sociologist of social class in contemporary Europe and co-director of the LSE's international inequalities institute, Mike Savage evokes his researches on social class in the UK. Outlining the importance of class-based inequalities and their new forms, from both a material and symbolic standpoint, he discusses why they are so critical to understand the Brexit and Donald Trump's election.

Books & Ideas: Could you elaborate on your sociological approach of social classes ?

Mike Savage: I have been interested in social class most of my academic career, but the topic has changed hugely. When I got my PhD in the 1980s, there still was the landscape of the industrial working class culture very strong in the British society, and a very strong feeling of the importance of trade unions and labour movements, but that disappeared and for many years sociologists thought that this was the end of class. I was never convinced of that, I always thought that class did still matter but in new ways and we had to find a new set of tools to understand what was happening. I also became very interested in what I call a sort of paradox of class which was that people often didn't seem to think about class and they weren't very class-conscious but actually, society was very deeply divided and you actually saw growing inequalities in the 1980s in Britain as a result of Thatcher's policies. But it didn't seem to be class awareness and class consciousness. That made me think a lot about the work of people

like Edward Thompson, a very famous Marxist historian, who emphasised the importance of class awareness and class consciousness. But that doesn't seem to be something that has been talked about these days. I started to become interested in Pierre Bourdieu because Bourdieu offers a different thinking about class, in which people who are being dominated are not aware of themselves as being in classes. They feel they're fragmented, they feel isolated: that idea seemed to capture much more what was being important in the British culture and society in the 1990s. One of my colleagues and friends, Beverley Skeggs, had a book on formations of class and gender that appeared in the late 1990s. She also made the point that young working-class women were not class-conscious, even if they were deeply marked by class. This is an issue I became very interested in.

Over the last fifteen or twenty years, I have become more interested in what isn't therefore said about class, how class is complicit, covert rather than overt, but how that actually masks huge and often increasing class divisions. I began looking at the working class during my PhD and then I became more interested in looking at the middle classes. It seemed to me that it was a huge area of change and I was interested in the old middle-class culture in Britain which was kind of bound up with certain people, often men who left school at sixteen or eighteen, that worked their way up the factory, entered the labour market, and became middle managers. But there was also a group of professionals who had been to university. This was a very distinctive British middle-class formation. But this was rapidly changing; the world of internally promoted managers was giving way to credential managers and to the rise of people going to elite universities. Therefore, I became very interested in the importance of cultural capital for class in the last ten years, being strongly influenced by Bourdieu.

I think it is important to know that Bourdieu means something different in the UK compared to France. In France he has a very distinctive position in French sociology; he has acquired an iconoclastic position. But in the UK Bourdieu came into academic thinking mainly through cultural studies and philosophy, so in a different meaning: his reading was pitched against economistic readings of class and was trying to make arguments about the importance of symbolic culture, symbolic values. I became very interested in « can we still use the notion of cultural capital today ? Is it still meaningful in British society — a very different society from France and at a very different time, now that have Internet and all these things?» With a number of colleagues at Manchester University, we did a big project called « Cultural capital and social exclusion », trying to map out cultural divisions in Britain. The argument we came up with on the basis of a big survey, ethnographic work, focus groups, interviews... was that there were absolutely very very big divisions in British culture, in British society but that they could not be entirely captured by Bourdieu's model of distinction as defining the highbrow culture. Because they had also become more « omnivorous », which is a phrase people often use. Elite people, middle-class people often weren't just interested in the upper, not only interested in the avant-garde, abstract art ; they were also interested in the popular culture, rock music and so on. There is a kind of voracious culture, which was very significant for the middle classes. We argued that fifteen years ago there was a kind of forced field in

which working-class culture was very strong, very cohesive, quite male-oriented but organised around sport, trade unions, voluntary associations; and that was pitched against middle-class culture. But the world of working-class culture collapsed and now the middle class is colonised by all forms of cultural activities. It is a kind of voracious, and quite intrusive and powerful form of cultural engagement. The working class has withdrawn into a more privatised, familial realm. Class divisions are still powerful but are taking a different form.

Books & Ideas: According to you, what is the specific responsibility of sociology regarding social inequalities?

Mike Savage: It is very interesting how the issue of inequality has become such a big issue in social sciences over the last 5 or 10 years. I became very aware of this when I joined the London School of Economics in 2012. When I worked at the University of York and the University of Manchester, I mainly collaborated with anthropologists, geographers, historians; coming to the LSE, lots of economists, lots of people working on different aspects of inequality. It was a very interesting environment to be in, and I was very impressed by the thinking by some economists who were trying to develop an understanding of inequality which went beyond purely the work of economists and the economic discipline. Piketty's work, when it was translated into English in 2014, was very important. It is a strange story: I was asked to help launch the book in English in Paris, and I was very busy and in the end, I couldn't make it. Then, I saw the huge success of that book and I read it a month or two after it was published. It did have a profound influence on me, partly by recognising the fact that Piketty is an economist, an excellent economist but that he is making the claim to people working in social sciences. He is also deliberately seeking to reach out to anthropology, geography and sociology. He is really critical of some of the understandings of inequality, and the move he makes is a simple but powerful move, from income distribution to looking at wealth and capital. It is very profoundly significant because much of the economics of inequality has been bound up simply with income shares.

The issue of the top 10% is a very important debate but the shift to looking at wealth and accumulation is for me very powerful and liberating for a number of reasons. One of them is that it does make a connection with Bourdieu's thinking. Of course, Piketty has made it very clear that he sees himself working in that tradition and he sees obvious lineage with that question of inheritance and accumulation. You can read him as doing for economic capital in some respects what Bourdieu did for cultural capital. Once you start thinking about questions of accumulation, wealth and capital, you also have to have a historical perspective because accumulation takes place over time. I had become very critical, particularly in the UK, how many sociologists had a very presentist view of the world — everything has changed, it has become globalised, or neo-liberal or post-modern. It is as if there were no long-term patterns. I think Piketty's work makes us realise that the weight of the past is actually increasing. When you think of the significance of debt and of wealth and accumulation, it becomes really important. So, as a sociologist, I think it is really important not to retreat in our disciplinary

domains and not be critical and say “well, you haven’t really understood Bourdieu correctly” or “you quote a simplistic theory of accumulation”, but to actually open up the debate and take things forward. What Piketty doesn’t do obviously is look at the cultural and social aspects of accumulation — he is aware of that, he is an economist — but I think he is allowing that possibility of elaborating a multi-dimensional approach to looking at accumulation in different domains. I think that’s why sociology can contribute, because unless we got an account of cultural capital and social capital to go alongside the accumulation of economic capital, we can’t really look at the more complex mechanisms of reproduction and we can’t look at how economic inequality translates into political conflicts and political tensions. I really see an obvious way in which economists and sociologists can work together on this.

Piketty’s thinking is very influential for some of the work we did on the British class survey. It was a big web survey with the BBC. We began planning it in 2010 and the BBC was also very influenced by Bourdieu and they wanted to have a survey that had measures of economic, social and cultural capital. The results attracted much attention. One of our major arguments, which overlaps closely with what Piketty is saying, is that rather than there being a big divide between the middle and the working class, which is how the British have thought about class in the past, we are really seeing it pulling apart. We are seeing the elite so much better off than they were 30-40 years ago but the people at the bottom, what we call the precariat, are still very vulnerable and have very few resources. In my view, it is a very profound reshaping of the class structure in which the big division is not in the middle area, but at the top, with the elite, and the rest of the population. But that’s not just an economic divide; it is also a very strong social and cultural divide.

***Books & Ideas:* Could you comment on the situation in the United Kingdom with the Brexit and in the United States with Donald Trump’s election?**

Mike Savage: It has been very interesting to see what has happened in the last few years. When I was doing my research ten, fifteen years ago, there was a sense that the debate about class was an academic debate, an abstract debate, but that wasn’t hugely influential to the political agenda. So politics did not really seem to be oriented very strongly around class divisions. There is a very strong belief that the political class knew how to organise things, to win an election, that they knew the mechanisms to get people to vote in certain ways. I think what has happened in the last few years is that the political class has been control in ways that they did not expect. It has been very sudden. I think it testifies to the significance of the changes that we have talked about. The fact that the elite is pulling away is now massively talked about in the newspapers as well as the idea that the elite has lost captivating people...That was a very big theme in the Brexit campaign. What took place in that campaign last year was that the Remain camp, the dominant political parties that wanted to stay in Europe, thought they knew how to run the campaign, in a very cautious way: “Safety first”, “they want to damage your jobs and your employment and your housing values”. They

had lost touch with the fact that many people hadn't shared in that prosperity, the economic growth. They felt left out, they felt they weren't being listened to. We did this very interesting analysis of the Brexit vote using our data of the British class survey. It was quite a narrow vote: 52% voted to leave the EU, 48% voted to stay in the EU. It was very geographically divided as Scotland and London strongly supported staying in the EU. We did a map trying to see what kind of factors seem to be active in the areas that voted to stay and in those that voted to leave. The most significant correlation we could find using data from the British class survey was social networks. Those areas where people's social networks tended to be high-status — people who knew doctors and chief executives: these were the areas voting to stay in the EU. The areas where people had lower-status social networks — they would know factory workers, bus drivers and cleaners — were the areas which tended to vote to leave the EU. This of course makes a lot of sense: there was this complete sense of shock from the intellectual classes when the results came out to leave the EU, because the people they had been talking to were their friends who entirely shared their beliefs. There was a real feeling of separation of these two different worlds. Many people said it was felt much more than the election result. It was about identities, the kind of person you were, and that led to a big shock which is still going on. Fundamentally, we can really understand the vote to leave the EU in terms of some kind of populist movement against the elite. There is a famous saying by Nigel Farage: "We got our country back". It is obviously a hugely simplistic account but it appealed to certain kinds of people who feel they have been ignored by offering them a chance to have some influence.

I would interpret Donald Trump in the US in a similar way. It is of course crazy because on one level, he is pitching against the elite while being such a wealthy man. Nonetheless, he has been able to appear as an outsider, he isn't playing by the normal rules and that attracts people in the US who feel like being marginalised. I think that we live in a new world where class politics is very powerful. It can be quite violent sometimes. It is not the traditional left/right and working class/middle class, it is much more complicated than that. It is the product of growing inequality in different domains. I think the recent election in the UK did not really change that. Labour did well but I am not convinced that they are going to be that successful going forward. All the political parties are looking as if they can't really capture the popular voice terribly effectively. It is going to be very turbulent times in the years to come.

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