1 Three Discourses of Social Exclusion

The term social exclusion is intrinsically problematic. It represents the primary significant division in society as one between an included majority and an excluded minority. This has implications for how both included and excluded groups are understood, and for the implicit model of society itself. Attention is drawn away from the inequalities and differences among the included. Notably, the very rich are discursively absorbed into the included majority, their power and privilege slipping out of focus if not wholly out of sight. At the same time, the poverty and disadvantage of the so-called excluded are discursively placed outside society. What results is an overly homogeneous and consensual image of society – a rosy view possible because the implicit model is one in which inequality and poverty are pathological and residual, rather than endemic. Exclusion appears as an essentially peripheral problem, existing at the boundary of society, rather than a feature of a society which characteristically delivers massive inequalities across the board and chronic deprivation for a large minority. The solution implied by a discourse of social exclusion is a minimalist one: a transition across the boundary to become an insider rather than an outsider in a society whose structural inequalities remain largely uninterrogated.

In practice, however, ‘social exclusion’ is embedded in different discourses which manifest these problems to varying extent. Three discourses are identified here: a redistributionist discourse (RED) developed in British critical social policy, whose prime concern is with poverty; a moral underclass discourse (MUD) which centres on the moral and behavioural delinquency of the excluded themselves; and a social integrationist discourse (SID) whose central focus is on paid work. They differ in how they characterize the boundary, and thus what defines people as insiders or outsiders, and how inclusion can be brought about. RED broadens out from its concern with poverty into a critique of inequality, and contrasts exclusion with a version of citizenship which calls for substantial redistribution of power and wealth. MUD is a gendered discourse with many forerunners, whose demons are criminally-inclined, unemployable young men and sexually and...
socially irresponsible single mothers, for whom paid work is necessary as a means of social discipline, but whose (self-) exclusion, and thus potential inclusion, is moral and cultural. SID focuses more narrowly on unemployment and economic inactivity, pursuing social integration or social cohesion primarily through inclusion in paid work. The three discourses differ quite markedly in how they present the relationship between inclusion/exclusion and inequality, a theme which is central to the overall argument of this book.

The following discussion of RED, MUD, and SID also considers how the valorization of unpaid work plays through the different discourses. In October 1997 the Office of National Statistics (ONS) published the first estimates of the extent and value of unpaid work in the British economy. If a monetary value were put on such work, at 1995 values it would have been at least equivalent to £341 billion, or more than the whole UK manufacturing sector, and perhaps as much as £739 billion, 120 per cent of gross domestic product. Among the reasons for this statistical development was the insensitivity of conventional national accounts to the movement of activities between market and non-market sectors. Yet despite this official endorsement, the dominant public and social-scientific understanding of ‘work’ remains paid work. Since the ONS figures confirmed that women do much more unpaid work than men, and that although men do more paid work, they also have more leisure, men’s work is more acknowledged, as well as more highly rewarded, than women’s work. Following a well-established theme in feminist arguments, Miriam Glucksmann argues that work cannot be elided with those forms which happen to take place in a market setting: work refers to all ‘activity necessary for the production and reproduction of economic relations and structures…irrespective of how and where it is carried out’. She describes the ‘manner by which all the labour in a particular society is divided up and allocated to different structures, institutions and activities’ as the total social organization of labour, and goes on to discuss historical changes in the gendered division of labour within and between household and market – shifts which the new satellite accounts are expressly developed to illuminate. Both Glucksmann’s perspective and the new official data raise another question. How is the recognition of not just the social but the economic value of currently unpaid work compatible with the distribution of the social product primarily through rewards for paid work? RED, MUD and SID have different capabilities for acknowledging, and thus for potentially addressing, this question.