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Responsibility without Power: Neoliberalism and Economic Democracy

The material argument for socialism has been weakened (Hobsbawm 1991b:320)

Without material security there can be no political freedom (Beck 2000b:14)

These quotes reflect the conflicting position of economic democracy and inequality as a late modern political concern within academia. On the one hand, Eric Hobsbawm, in his defence of socialism ‘after the fall’, acknowledges that the extreme poverty and inequality of life circumstances which made up part of the original basis for socialism no longer have as strong a hold; Engels would not recognize modern-day Manchester. While he does not argue that socialism should simply forget economic inequality, he suggests that it needs to focus its appeal on other factors, such as ecology, the gap between rich and poor countries and the subordination of individuals to the market. On the other hand, there’s Beck, whose animosity towards socialism knows few limits, arguing for the centrality of the economic to political sociology. While this has the feel of a throwaway comment in part of a book-long discussion about forms of work,1 it does suggest the inability to entirely leave the economic behind for late modern political sociology. This issue is central to our discussion of libertarian socialism in late modernity. The question of how neoliberalism impacts political individualization, in terms of both its propagation and the limits placed upon it, was the third key theme of late modern political sociology. We have seen in chapters 3 and 4 how neoliberalism and privatization have greatly blunted the potential for political action in late modernity and created an unequal form of market-based consumer action. These link to the third tenet

1 M. Dawson, Late Modernity, Individualization and Socialism © Matt Dawson 2013
of libertarian socialism, that the inequalities of capitalist society, here conceived in terms of both allocative and authoritative resources, make justice impossible, a fundamentally Durkheimian point.

This has only been exacerbated by the growing inequality of neoliberal society. Such inequality, ‘unparalleled both historically and compared with the changes taking place at the same time in most other developed countries’ (Brewer et al. 2009:2), is an increasingly important issue for late modern sociology. The consolidation of neoliberal ideology and the crash of the economic system which this ideology shaped have not only led to an increasingly unequal economic order but also brought the recognition of such inequality front and centre in contemporary political life throughout the world. The bailouts of banks, car manufacturers and other business with the corresponding cuts to public spending mean that the widening gap between rich and poor is no longer a truth revealed only through careful analysis of statistical evidence but is instead confronted on a daily basis by unemployment figures and the latest cuts. These events have seen such movements as the Indignados in Spain, student protests in Chile, street protests in Greece and the worldwide Occupy movement achieve a large degree of fame and support. As noted by the interactionists, this occurs alongside the increased recognition of particularly classed explanations of inequality (Savage 2000, Skeggs 2004, 2005, MacKenzie et al. 2006, Krage and Skogen 2007, Boli and Elliott 2008, Lehmann 2009). As we have seen in this book, it was the claim of Lefebvre and political individualization that the expansion of political issues and effects into the everyday increases the potential for critique and enhances the push towards political action. The movements listed above are all examples of this process and the latest example of collectivized movements focused on economic inequality (Sörbom and Wennerhag 2012).

Based upon this, we can argue that not only would greater equality be a desirable normative goal for libertarian socialism, for reasons that will follow, but also it is increasingly demanded. But, it may be asked, why be concerned with equality? Wouldn’t it be more effective and fair to ensure that poverty is removed? What the highest earners earn is none of our concern, as long as the poorest can fulfil their basic concerns. In short, be New Labour, but better (Giddens 2002). This returns us to Durkheim’s conception of anomie. Allowing inequality to grow, even with the poorest taken care of, decreases the ‘collective forces’ holding these groups together, and the relationship becomes one of antagonism as the desires of one group are radically outstripped by the achievements of another. Two opposing forms of civic morals begin to