City, 2013
Vol. 17, No. 3, 299–311, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2013.795327

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Class analysis for whom?

An alien-ated view of London

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In a valuable and engaging critique, Hamnett and Butler conclude that our analysis of the socio-spatial dimensions of inequality in London originates from a 'parallel universe', that it is 'bizarre' for us 'middle-class university professors' to claim that 'the middle class does not exist,' and that our approach involves 'looking into the rear view mirror or class structure in the 1840s.' In this paper we provide a response, and we reiterate the urgent need for class-conscious politics and method in contemporary urban research. Dominant narratives of postindustrial transnational urbanism tend to erase any concern for class conflict, as old occupational structures that once closely reflected locally-observable relations of production are replaced by a much more intricate and respatialized occupational matrix of positions that (when analysed in conventional ways) creates an aspirational mirage of utopian middle-class opportunity. Yet the materialist conditions of capitalist urbanization intensify class antagonisms, while polarizing social relations within domains typically understood as 'middle-class' (including the professoriate). At the same time, the Right has hijacked traditional Left commitments to radical openness to difference and contingency, thus diverting critical energies away from fundamental challenges to class inequality into the safer technocratic territory of managing inequalities with a creative, de-classified menu of friendly-sounding policies of inclusion, mixing, tolerance, and social sustainability. One way to challenge this dangerous trend involves a fusion of multivariate quantitative analysis with contemporary critical social theory (drawing on Žižek and others) to account for the new multidimensional relations of postindustrial occupational structures within the increasingly severe class antagonisms of capitalist urbanization.

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Key words: class, London, Žižek, inequality

We are genuinely grateful for Hamnett and Butler's (2013) meticulous engagement with the issues raised in our 'Class-ifying London' paper (Davidson and Wyly 2012). In an era when 'capitalism's ideological combine-harvester' (Smith 2005, 891) has kicked into high gear, there are fewer spaces and opportunities for meaningful critical debates that transgress the instrumental confines of a paradoxically conservative mainstream, now that even critical ideas are treated as yet another creative-class sector of 'knowledge production'. We are thus grateful to *City*, and to Hamnett and Butler, for the kind of struggle over ideas that need not answer to the pervasive corruptions of 'policy relevance', 'impact' or any of the other new key words of funding agencies and state elites who praise 'evidence-based decision-making' while reinforcing an

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ideological industrial base of 'decision-based evidence-making' (Slater 2008). If we are indeed 'middle-class university professors' who claim, 'with straight faces, that the middle class does not exist' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 198), we are deeply sensitive to the freedoms provided by our privileged positions. We have extraordinary (although by no means unlimited) autonomy to pursue ideas and debates wherever they may take us—even to what Hamnett and Butler (2013) call a 'parallel universe' glimpsed in 'the rear-view mirror of class structure in the 1840s' (207). Such freedom entails the risk of unpopular ideas with no policy relevance, proffered by us 'bizarre' characters who may turn out to be the 'Rip van Winkles of class structure' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 207).

However, this freedom itself makes a crucial point: can 'middle-class university professors' be seen as occupying the same class position as counter clerks, cashiers, sales assistants, telephone operators, security guards, occupational safety officers, assistant nurses, dental nurses and company secretaries? We certainly do not wish to view London or any other city 'only from a business class seat atop the academic world' (Smith 2005, 898). Nevertheless, it seems clear that middle-class academics provide a vivid illustration of the 'embodied lie', the 'denial of antagonism' (Žižek 1999, 187) that has been our concern in some quarters of urban research. As 'cognitive-cultural capitalism' (Scott 2011) and the aggressive neo-liberalization of education have forced the academy 'to bale free flowing ideas into marketable commodities' (Smith 2005, 891), the sharply antagonistic social relations of contemporary capitalism have penetrated deeply into an occupation that once could legitimately be regarded as 'middle class'. Now things are quite different. Some of those who are addressed as 'Professor' have tenured positions, celebrity salaries, rich pensions, quarterly royalty payments, fully diversified investment portfolios, £42,000 annual pay increases (Hurst 2013) and perhaps even tour managers to cope with all the big-fee speaking invitations (MacGillis 2010). Others, also called 'Professor', survive on short-term appointments conditional on heavy teaching loads, often pieced together by commuting amongst scattered, cash-strapped educational institutions that survive only through the intensified exploitation of an expanding cadre of *lumpendoctorates* and others in the intellectual precariat. To be clear: personally, we would not consider ourselves in the former category—we don't have tour managers!—but we are deeply, viscerally aware with materialist yet embodied affect, that we are far more privileged than the contingent faculty, the vast and growing intellectual precariat. From a standpoint between these two contemporary extremes, however, it is possible to see clearly the dramatic expansion of inequality within a single occupation. Antagonism has intensified *within* the middle-class occupation of 'professor', and there is evidence of the same kinds of processes underway across many other job classifications (Batnitzky, McDowell, and Dyer 2008; Ciupijus 2011; Stewart 2011; Li and Devine 2011; Kilmova and Rudas 2012), as the 20th-century epoch of 'maximum inequality *between* nations on a global scale' evolves into a world of variegated but generally increasing inequality *within* nations (Therborn 2012, 12). Hence our deep caution on how to interpret the growth of broad categories that are commonly labelled 'middle class'.

Given all of these considerations, we were a bit surprised with the task that has been set in responding to Hamnett and Butler's (2013) rebuttal. We welcome their spirited criticism. However, it seems that they've misread our work just as seriously as we are alleged to have done with theirs. Nevertheless, we'll do our best to find a wormhole to connect these two 'parallel universes'.

Our paper on London's class composition and transition had quite modest ambitions. The paper began as a conversation about the problematic way in which the UK census records social class. The problem has plagued us for a number of years, in various attempts to gauge the level of class transition and

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gentrification in London. Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) provide an apt example of this problem. As we outlined in our original paper, the Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) paper carefully examines 2001 UK census data to demonstrate the extent of class transition in London. As they state in the paper's abstract, the most important finding of their investigation was thus: '... that London's gentrification is now being partly driven by the expansion of the "middle" middle classes of lower professional and intermediate non-manual groups' (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008, 67).

However, who are the '"middle" middle classes of lower professional and intermediate non-manual groups' (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008, 67)? Here things get interesting since when you dig down in the census categories, you find that all manner of occupations are included in these groups (see our original paper). As we have argued, many of these occupations can hardly be considered middle class. If you therefore rely on UK census socio-economic groupings which are categorized as middle class, but are in fact a whole grab bag of occupations, you will almost inevitably develop misleading narrations of socio-economic composition and transition. And so began our attempt to develop a presentation of London's socio-economic composition using UK census data in ways that might provide alternative insights into the dramatic changes underway over the past few generations.

One of those circulating misleading narrations of socio-economic composition and transition we identified in our paper was that of 'social upgrading' and related interpretations of polarization/professionalization and gentrification. Focusing on the bourgeois utopianism proffered by Floridian theorists and implemented by creatively coiffured policy elites, developers and investors, we argued that problematic interpretations of socio-economic census data can serve to cement the post-political status quo and obscure underlying class antagonisms. By pairing post-Marxian social theory with factorial ecology, we sought to provide a quantitatively 'extensive' yet theoretically critical description of the socio-economic composition of London and provide an interpretative frame that maintains a concern with the persistent class antagonisms reproduced through capitalism.

In their recently published rebuttal, Hamnett and Butler (2013) identify three major problems with our paper. First, they claim we present a one-sided and mis-representative take on their work on post-industrial transition in London. Second, they suggest our discussion of social class is based on a schoolboy understanding of Marxist social analysis. Third, they claim that we are inconsistent in recognizing the existence of gentrification but—supposedly—denying the existence of the middle classes. Since we will dismiss the idea that we deny the existence of the middle classes, Hamnett and Butler's claim that our emphasis on gentrification is inconsistent with our reading of class requires little refuting. In the following sections, we will do our best to take these critical comments on their merits and offer some response.

The mettle of the middle

Hamnett and Butler's (2013) rebuttal begins with the claim we provide an incorrect representation of their 2008 paper. In just one example of the many refutations made, they state: 'Not only do we *not* claim that London has become homogeneously middle class (we claim it has become *more* middle class and that the middle-class areas of London have grown in extent)' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 199; emphasis in original). Their complaint seems to stem from a strange reading of our work. The distinction drawn is between London being totally middle class (our perceived reading of their 2008 work) and their claim that London has become more middle class. The difference between these two positions has major consequences, and it is unclear how they reached the conclusions offered in their rebuttal.

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The first, and most important, point to note is that we do not claim to see Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden's (2008) paper as presenting London as 'homogeneously middle class'. It seems bizarre to have to assert such a simple point to such esteemed colleagues, but it is important to state this for a number of reasons. In their response, Hamnett and Butler present the distinction between our characterizations of London in an almost cartoonist fashion; totally middle class versus a little bit more middle class. We find this type of debate particularly counter-productive, even if it does allow for a few of Chris Hamnett's tired one-liners. In our paper we went to great lengths (literally) to *question* the characterization of London as becoming more middle class. Our main complaint was that the census groupings (SEG 5.1 and 5.2) where Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) identify the vast majority of London's middle-class growth provide little basis to make such a claim. As such, we attempt to provide a representation of the city that provides a multi-variate and—hopefully—more insightful image of the city. To be sure there are major limitations of our work—many of them resulting from biases and limitations in the public data systems being destroyed by conservative political coalitions seeking to conceal the shifting paths of class projects in Britain and elsewhere (Shearmur 2010; Dorling 2012). However, what it can do is provide a pause before we start talking about London—or any post-industrial city—becoming more middle class.

Why is this important? As we attempted to demonstrate in our paper, it is important because the prospect of a largely middle-class society (i.e. a society without significant class divisions and barriers) has become a powerful mechanism of instrumental rationality in today's politics. It is the potent ingredient of Floridian snake oil, the kernel of Blair's Britain, the avatar of Cameron's Big Society and the market-tested vaccination offered by Obama to inoculate against right-wing charges of 'class war'. It is the stuff that stokes the global city discourse, in which the promise that all places can become like London or New York has evolved from a coarse, loud scream of economic competitiveness to a more soothing voice in 'the soft-focus terms of cultural policy' (Peck 2005, 740). It's no longer just about attracting the global elite of bankers, financial analysts and the rest of the usual suspects of political–economic power brokers. Now it's also about becoming more 'middle class', and the curious combination of material capital gains achieved through (non-)representational downward mobility: in a world of accelerating 'networks of outrage and hope' (Castells 2012), the real and aspiring rich understand the safety of the 'middle class' label. Considering the astonishing inequalities of contemporary capitalist urbanization and global city competition, we should thus be wary of broad interpretations based on problematic aggregations of census data:

> 'What is clear is that, on the basis of the census data, there is no evidence of widespread proletarianisation and little evidence for London having become a "dual city" (Buck et al., 2002). What we are investigating in this paper is essentially the geography of its increasingly middle-class population and how that has changed in relation to the South East region, England and Wales and within London itself. In essence, what has happened over the past 25 years is that the class structure of England and Wales has become inverted: inner London used to be more working class compared with outer London, the South East and the rest of England and Wales; it now has a greater concentration of the higher social classes than any of them and it is here that the professional middle classes appear to be growing faster than elsewhere.' (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008, 70)

To reaffirm the point made in our paper, it is not that we claim Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) present London as homogeneously middle class, but rather our paper shows a persistent social geography that counters the claim that London is to be

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characterized as increasingly middle class (and therefore we can dismiss the majority of claims about gentrification-induced displacement). So eager are Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) to re-confirm professionalization over polarization and replacement over displacement, that the empirical problems and persistent geographies of class are overlooked for the '... most significant finding [which] is that London's gentrification is now being partly driven by the expansion of the "middle" middle classes of lower professional and intermediate non-manual groups' (70).

This problematic characterization of London's social geography in their 2008 paper is almost acknowledged on the basis of their recent rebuttal, which consists largely of the claim that 'we've written about that elsewhere'. Citing Hamnett's 2003 *Unequal City* and Butler and Watt's 2007 *Understanding Social Inequality*, they claim it is misleading on our part to state they 'gloss over issues of inequality' since both books talk at length about the issue. We agree. Both books occupy prominent positions on our bookshelves. Hamnett and Butler have overlooked the fact that our critique of their 2008 paper was just that: a critique of the paper. We were not criticizing a career's worth of work (cf. Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2013). The resort to writing about inequality elsewhere is important though, since it helps to further demonstrate the problematic ways in which class and inequality are treated in both their 2008 paper and recent rebuttal.

Class, (re)occupied

As we claimed in our paper, the relationship between class and occupational groupings is difficult to analyse. Indeed, we spent a considerable amount of space relating the census-based categorization of occupations to questions of class in our paper. In the section entitled 'Questioning Classifications of Class' we argued that changes in occupational structures cannot be read as de facto changes in class relations. To put this most simply, occupational differences do not—and never have—mapped neatly onto class relations. The problem we identified with Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden's (2008) narration of London's class structure was that they described working-class areas as 'still lingering on' and, drawing on Hamnett's earlier work, claimed that the working classes were being 'replaced'. The message presented is one of inexorable working-class decline; occupation-based census data are used to support this claim. In turn, it then becomes possible to identify a process of gentrification occurring across London via a process of replacement, as opposed to displacement. And then for those so inclined it becomes possible to foresee the Floridian dream of a middle-class urban future. Our reason for drawing on critical theory to introduce our discussion of London's social composition intended to serve as a device that would challenge such a simple, unidimensional reading of class relations from occupational census data.[1] At least for Hamnett and Butler (2013), we appear to have failed miserably here.

In their response, Hamnett and Butler (2013) present the laughable summary of our paper's argument: 'The core of their argument appears to be that the middle class does not exist' (198). From this point they go on to state 'we find it bizarre that middle-class university professors can claim, with straight faces, that the middle class does not exist. This is denial of false consciousness on a grand scale' (198). Whilst we appreciate the attempt at amateur psychoanalysis, this statement presents something of a conundrum here. We find it hard to believe that Hamnett and Butler really do think this is the core of our argument, and so do not really want to waste our or the readers' time in refuting this statement. This stated, Hamnett and Butler do return to this idea in their discussion of class change later in their rebuttal. They draw on our use of Žižek (1999) to claim:

> 'Davidson and Wyly appear to be looking back to a simplistic binary Marxist conception of class which, while having an exemplary conceptual clarity, has a diminishing purchase in the post-war period which has seen the massive growth of this class existing between labour and capital'. (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 201)

Here, for all those unfamiliar with this recent strand of critical theory (also see Badiou 2012; Eagleton 2011; Hardt and Negri 2011; Harvey 2012), it is important to expand a little.

When we wrote our paper, we knew that combining contemporary critical theory with extensive quantitative work presented many challenges. One of these challenges was how to explain the critical theory in enough depth to have it connect to the minutia of census classifications. Given the conclusions Hamnett and Butler have reached, it appears this challenge may have beaten us; perhaps there is no substitute for reading the diverse mixture of epistemological and methodological sources cited in our piece. Either way, it is important to re-state our main point and provide a little more elucidation on the purposes of Žižek (amongst others).

Žižek's argument that the middle class is a non-class is a Marxian argument in that it theorizes the existence of class as stemming from the capital/labour relation. It is therefore a very abstract theoretical argument about the core relations within capitalist society. This is a core relation that Hamnett and Butler themselves recognize in their own response, with several comments about bankers and elites being supported by their acknowledgement of 'capitalism' and the 'capitalist city'. Žižek's theory is, not, however, an empirically operationalized argument about the details of socio-economic structures or the absence of particular taxonomies that can be called 'middle class'. Considering the long quote from Žižek's 1999 *Ticklish Subject* included in our paper (Davidson and Wyly 2012, 402), it is simply impossible to draw such a conclusion. We used the quote to make a simple point: that within capitalist societies there is a core social antagonism that does not map neatly onto readily observable socio-economic structures. The problem is that this mapping of socio-economic groupings onto capitalist relations is often attempted. Moreover, when this is attempted in the context of any theory or policy interest that ignores the history or present condition of capitalist social relations (e.g. Florida), the result is often a tautological series of trend lines implying that everyone will soon win the lottery giving them a ticket to prosperity and opportunity.

If we have social antagonisms related to capitalism (as Hamnett and Butler accept in their rebuttal), what drives them? Where do they come from? To put it in clear Marxian terms, they come from the contradictory interests of capital and labour. Of course, the tricky thing for social scientists (not to mention revolutionary leftists) is that this antagonism is rarely manifest in the everyday categories and social roles of capitalist society. Indeed, to repeat more of Žižek's arguments, a society where the capital/labour antagonism was fully visible (i.e. reflected in a social structure of capitalists and proletarians) would be a society without capitalist relations (i.e. class consciousness and revolutionary conditions would exist).

Of course, it is easy to see the industrial city as having a little more clarity with regards to these capital/labour relations. Indeed, both we and Hamnett and Butler repeatedly revert to the idea of the industrial city with its industrial labouring working classes and neat class relations. Therefore, when we try to map capitalist social relations onto today's social structure, the industrial city continues to serve as a reference point for a time and place when the politics of class were more clearly defined. This stated it is certainly worth reiterating that many of the working-class communities that are part of this industrial city image remain present in London. Furthermore, stories of struggles

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for adequate living conditions and tenure security remain strikingly unchanged in post-industrial London, as Watt (2013) has recently described: 'Most of the young people we interviewed aspired to a council flat, a form of housing that now represents an elusive "gold standard" of secure and low-cost accommodation in London' (114).

As we previously argued, the social changes witnessed since the advent of 'post-industrialism' certainly pose considerable theoretical and analytical challenges. With respect to the latter challenge, it has become more difficult to identify the class position of large sections of the occupational structure—as Hamnett and Butler (2013) describe. Put simply, the large labouring workforces of the industrial city have been in decline in places like the UK for decades. This occupational and social structure has been replaced with something quite different (see Watt 2013), and this is where we agree with Hamnett and Butler. The analytical challenge associated with this post-industrial city is therefore how to understand class relations within a limited and limiting occupational taxonomy. Do we read a decline of traditional working-class occupations as a decline in the social and political significance of antagonistic class relations?

The major problem faced when answering this question is that we have imperfect data to place various occupations in relation to the class antagonism. To be sure, this problem also existed in the industrial city, but perhaps in lesser degrees. We can, as Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) do, try and rely on occupational classifications developed in the industrial period to track a transition of social structures and then draw inferences about class structures. However, as we have previously argued, this approach is bound up with an array of problems. Most importantly, it is the very occupational groups where we have seen the largest post-industrial 'changes' (see Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008) that are the most difficult to assign to any meaningful class position.

In order to illustrate this problem in our previous paper we spent a great deal of time deconstructing the UK census categories SEG 5.1 and 5.2. This esoteric project was undertaken because Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) had found that these groups were largely responsible for the recent 'post-industrial' growth of the middle classes in London. The problem, as we argued, is that these groupings are the essence of a chaotic conception in terms of class status. As a result the 'trends' identified in London's post-industrial transition must be re-evaluated. Put simply, assuming middle-class growth via changes in these occupational categories is inherently problematic since you cannot conflate changing occupational structures with changing class relations. This is a mistake repeated in Hamnett and Butler's rebuttal.

In their rebuttal Hamnett and Butler gloss over the inconvenient problem of their reliance on the census categories 5.1 and 5.2 to narrate their narration of London becoming more middle class. However, where they do discuss occupation-based census classifications, they again problematically conflate census-based occupational categories with classes:

> '... while the growth of SEG 5.1 and 5.2 (the lower middle class) comprised the largest element of overall middle class growth in London, the growth of SEG 1–4 (the managerial and professional groups) was far more marked in inner London than it was in either outer London or the rest of the UK from 1981 to 2001. This has had the result that whereas inner London used to be more working class compared with outer London, it now has a greater concentration of the higher social classes than other areas of Britain and they have grown faster (Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008). This does not mean that the working class in inner London has disappeared, but it has clearly shrunk ...' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 202)

Here their argument about the numerically small growth in SEG 1–4 is misleading (see Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden 2008), but

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the main point to emphasize is how problematic census categories are again relied upon to narrate London's class transition: occupations are mapped neatly onto class relations. The point of conducting our multi-variate analysis of London's social structure again appears lost on Hamnett and Butler. The exercise was performed as an attempt to try and deal with the problems of SEG categories—to examine the multidimensional relations among occupational divisions, education, household composition, ethnicity, and other facets of neighbourhood and society. Occupational data are of course useful in any attempt to operationalize empirically a class analysis, but social class involves much more.

So how does critical theory help us here? It guards against the misinterpretation that Hamnett and Butler repeat in their rebuttal, emphasizing the 'massive growth of this class existing between labour and capital'. Labour and capital are not occupations or even classes. The labour–capital nexus is an ontological social relation within capitalist societies, and the growth of classes defined (by whatever theory) as 'middle' tells us nothing about inequality or class antagonism. We had hoped to make this clear when we wrote:

> 'What Žižek's critique demonstrates is the difference between identifying class structure (socio-economic stratifications) and an accounting of the antagonistic social relations. It signals to the fact that whilst occupational structures may have changed dramatically, there is little evidence to suggest that these can be read as a decline of (urban) social antagonisms …' (Davidson and Wyly 2012, 402)

Hamnett and Butler seem indifferent to our effort to theorize how the question of class antagonism might relate to a social structure that lacks the clear occupational distinctions of the industrial city. Instead, they read Žižek's relating of the capitalist antagonism to the middle classes as an assertion that the middle classes do not exist: 'Referring to them [the middle classes] as a "non-class" is simply to revert to a very traditional and purist form of Marxist analysis which sees the owners of the means of production—the bourgeoisie—and the proletariat as the only classes in town' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 200). Leaving aside the dubious characterization that this is traditional or purist Marxism,[2] this assertion makes the same error of relating class relations to occupational structure. Žižek's point is that the antagonism between capital and labour is not singularly manifest in the middle classes. Rather the middle classes exist within a matrix of strange interstices in the social structures of contemporary capitalism, where the abstract antagonist relation between capital and labour is not immediately evident and, indeed, can be almost entirely concealed by ideologies of consumer sovereignty, human capital, professional entrepreneurialism and the steadily expanding class post-consciousness of 'creativity'. It is also here where the growth in occupations designated as 'middle class' can deliver (in the language favoured in contemporary economic policy) good 'returns to human capital investments' on the one hand, while on the other hand privatization and intensified land-market competition lead to a smooth re-capitalization of wages through rents and property prices.[3] To be sure, many middle-class professionals are able to parlay current salary income into property wealth and diversified financial portfolios; but accumulated wealth intensifies the contradictions of middle-class positions—masking and displacing class antagonisms without eliminating them. At what point does a middle-class occupation backed by financial and property wealth cease to have any meaning of 'middle' in an increasingly unequal society? Moreover, many working in 'middle-class' jobs are caught between the debts incurred to acquire 'human capital' credentials and the hamster-wheel housing markets of the neo-liberal metropolis that reinforce class divisions. Others—counter clerks, cashiers, sales assistants—are

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in jobs where human capital investments are simply not rewarded. All of these factors justify a cautious stance towards Floridian middle-class utopianism—we can all become middle class!—which reads a localized growth in the middle classes as the prospect that capitalist antagonism can be erased from the social structure.

Hamnett and Butler remain unpersuaded by our deployment of critical theory and factorial ecology to parse questions of class from occupational structures. For example, in their response they argue:

> 'Class conflicts are also increasingly manifest in terms of education, specifically in terms of competition for schools, where the middle classes are expanding in to the catchment areas of the most popular schools [...] and cuts in welfare benefits are squeezing sections of the poor out of inner London.' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 203–204)

Our question here: what are 'class conflicts'? Their use of the plural suggests a different theorization of class conflict compared with the conceptualization used in our paper. Indeed, it seems a theorization that requires some explanation, since they also state that: 'It is inconceivable for any capitalist city, past or present, not to exhibit a major variation in its class composition' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 204). Our point here is that Hamnett and Butler agree that we're talking about *capitalist* spaces and societies. It's just that they have a quite different theory of class conflict, or perhaps a theory of the *absence* of class conflict. Yes, to be sure, all cities have 'variation' in 'class composition'. However, if we're trying to make sense of the capitalist city and its class relations, surely we need to begin with an understanding of the origins of the social antagonisms that define capitalist societies. Žižek's attack on the 'embodied lie' of the middle class is a caution, a warning that we should not be distracted by the details of, say, fights over the distributional politics of public goods—since these fights have proliferated as the consumer-sovereignty identities of 'cognitive-cultural' capitalism (Scott 2011) have accelerated the 'leveraged buyout' of class consciousness itself (Smith 2000). Real and aspirational capitalists alike have learned the finer points of identity politics and rights-claiming when it comes to fighting over public resources; only a vigilant theory of capitalist class relations will help us understand the contemporary urban condition.

We are therefore left with little idea about how Hamnett and Butler theorize this connection. They read class conflicts as being plural and manifest in education and welfare reform. To be sure, these things are indeed infused with class relations, but such a reading of class conflict(s) appears to be simply based on the idea that different groups of people compete for different resources. For us, this seems perilously close to the 'genetically modified politics' (Smith 2005, 891) of capitalist inequality cloaked by post-class discourse; the approach makes it difficult to relate questions of class relations to occupational structure in productive ways. The approach leaves socio-economic differences unhinged from any theory of political economy.

Class dismissed?

> 'In a world in which the modernity of the working class and of socialism have been declared obsolete, middle-class society has become the symbol of an alternative future.... The core of this utopia is a dream of boundless consumption, of a middle class taking possession of the earth ... The dark side of this dream is its inherent exclusivism. People who are not middle class—or rich—do not have any redeeming features or assets. They are just "losers", as the televised rant which ignited the US Tea Party in 2009 put it. They are the "underclass", the "chavs".' (Therborn 2012, 18)

The crux of the argument in Hamnett and Butler's rebuttal is that we can witness a growing middle class alongside growing levels of inequality. Their portrait of social

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change thus consists of (a) a low-income group who are largely welfare dependent and placed in the remnants of London's social housing, (b) a growing mass of middle-income earners who struggle to afford property ownership and (c) a group of wealthy international elites. Their portrayal of inequality downplays the contrasts between these groups as an outdated 'Marxist' dichotomy between the working classes and capitalist masters. Rather they understand inequality as two sided, that the lower income welfare dependants (their terms) are less equal than the middle-income 'strugglers' and the middle-income groups are less equal than the super-wealthy elite. As a result, there is more inequality in London. Whilst they find a growing middle-class population in London 'replacing' the working classes, a characterization we question, they can also claim to be concerned with inequality. Consequently, they open a space to counter our critique of the problematic trope of middle-class utopianism.

Taken on their terms, the interpretation of inequality presented by Hamnett and Butler in their rebuttal (and other work) is not one we would challenge. As we also showed, London has changed since the mid-20th century and this has resulted in new distributions of social groups. Whilst it remains difficult to derive a full understanding of income inequalities across the city, based on the use of multiple indicators we can certainly identify areas of poverty, middle ranges of economic resources and enclaves of extreme wealth.

Our main point of contention was the claim that 'London's gentrification is now being partly driven by the expansion of the "middle" middle classes of lower professional and intermediate non-manual groups'. Such a conclusion is based on an inappropriate use of UK census data given that we are dealing with relatively small percentage changes. Put simply, we are reading an expansion of the 'middle classes' and the creation of middle-class neighbourhoods from occupational groupings that have little consistency with regards to their class status. It therefore appeared that Butler, Hamnett, and Ramsden (2008) were falling into a now common narration of post-industrial transition that all too often erases a concern for class conflict. The erosion of an occupational structure that once closely reflected the readily observable production relations of class—and the growth in those parts of the taxonomy where class relations are more difficult to discern through conventional methods—is taken as a decline in class conflict itself. Yet rather than attempt to generate an understanding of how and why class conflict appears to have become less important within cities like London (i.e. address where it has been displaced to, where London's class relations stretch to, stop being limited by the restrictive frame of the 'city' when reading political economy, etc.), this type of scholarship appears content with a form of descriptive empiricism that employs the language of class and capitalism stripped of political content. Moreover, in a world of deepening class inequalities, descriptive empiricism makes it very hard indeed to 'emerge from the morass of statistical information' (Smith 1987, 62) with a clear view of continuity and change in the social relations of capitalism. Descriptive empiricism all too often plays the role of what Cosgrove and McHugh (2008, 80–83) would call 'satirical empiricism'.

This type of scholarship is most concerning. Whilst Hamnett and Butler's rebuttal leverages the recent financial crisis, with all its talk of greedy bankers, struggling wage earners and the forever demonized welfare dependants, in their rebuttal their work has almost zero political content. Their resort to descriptions of the 'capitalist city' ring completely hollow since they don't appear to have a theory of capitalism. They see all types of urban conflicts between different *occupational groups* as *class conflicts*. Such a description means capitalist antagonisms are everywhere and, therefore, nowhere. This type of analysis therefore has no purchase upon the political economy, no way of

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relating emergent social changes and conflicts to the structural economy.

The task of interpreting the contemporary status of class conflict in the hyper-real world of late capitalism has been a major focus of critical social theory in recent years. We find no reason to defend this work here; it speaks for itself. The reason we drew on this critical scholarship in our paper was to maintain a concern with capitalist class relations in an urban context where social and occupational structures (and commentaries thereof) often mask such relations. By building out a theoretical framework from which we could interpret a factorial ecology of London, we sought to critique a dominant trope in contemporary urban studies—dominated by a tendency to shy away from theorizing how capitalist class antagonisms are manifest in today's cities. This work dominates the pages of policy reports and certain scholarly journals, and its sunny, optimistic tone does make the story a pleasure to read. *Cities are back! We're in an urban world! We can all be creative! We can all be middle class!* Unfortunately, this narrative makes it all too easy to drink from the Kool-Aid of late capitalist ideology, at which point all the incentives encourage researchers to redirect 'critical' energies to the technocratic tasks of *managing* inequality through friendly sounding policies of inclusion, mixing, tolerance and 'social sustainability'. Much of this work is important and necessary in the context of present political constraints. Yet the capitalist Right has learned all the finer points of satirical empiricism, and has hijacked the Left's 'radical openness' (Wolch 2003) and the search for ever more fine-grained partitionings of difference and contingency as a way of moving beyond the crude 'simplicity' of binaries and generalizations. The *management* of inequality deflects the more serious threat of *challenges to the sources of inequality*. In such a climate, much of the urban studies literature remains unconcerned with any serious critique of capitalist social relations—and in the case of Hamnett and Butler's rebuttal, the claim to be concerned with the inequalities of capitalism is joined with a dismissal of 'Marxist' analysis as simplistic and obsolete. This is the finest production of capitalist ideology: to acknowledge Marxian theories of capitalism while lampooning the idea that they have any current relevance for empirics or politics is to perform the essential job of providing acceptable 'critical commentary', reassuring a society that adequate reflection is on offer. However, the dangers of the empirical turn (Smith 1987) are worse than ever. The data never speak for themselves (Gould 1981), despite the current capitalist obsession with 'Big Data' and neuromarketing efforts to hack the source code of consumer sovereignty itself (Garcia and Saad 2008; Lazer et al. 2009). Without an explicit theory of class, even the most practical and creative of scholars—especially those 'who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist' (Keynes 1936, quoted in McGovern 2005, 466). Most economists (defunct or otherwise) are neoclassical, capitalist economists—and thus today's taken-for-granted world is premised on a classless utopia of competition and consumer choice. The declarations of 'the Iron Lady of the Western World'—'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families'—have become the new axiom for reading the urban landscapes of today's capitalist world cities (Thatcher 1987, quoted in McGovern 2005, 851). Such implicit, common-sense assumptions have become the foundational ontology for the interpretation of almost any map of big-city patterns of inequality, diversity and difference.

Perhaps our cartographies of class can be lampooned as an unreconstructed Marxist class analysis for disgruntled professors—ones who, moreover, claim 'with straight faces, that the middle class does not exist' (Hamnett and Butler 2013, 198). With neither smile nor smirk, this is our claim: we consider ourselves in the middle of a middle-class occupation that is—like so many other

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presumably 'middle-class' jobs of cognitive-cultural capitalism—becoming ever more sharply polarized, as the market metrics of (academic) capitalism reinforce intensified competition and risk/reward calculative practices. As professors with class positions that cannot and must not be denied, we certainly recognize the structural and material basis of our occupations—and, more importantly, the ever-narrowing space of partial autonomy within the occupation that remains sheltered from the 'neoliberal wind that capitalizes, commodifies, classes, and marketizes everything' (Smith 2005, 899). We have not undertaken the kind of ethnographic work necessary to 'ground-truth' every part of the maps, with their fine-grained details offering one reflection of the spatial expression of the UK's evolving class structure in London's built environment. However, Watt's (2013, 99) close-up ethnographies of 'two working-class spaces' in East London provide reasons to be very cautious towards the utopias of spatial form and social process (Harvey 2000) now promoted through Floridian global city creative ideologies; so many cities have many 'working-class spaces' that are under siege by policies based in part on utopian middle-class cartographies. Moreover, Catterall's (2013, p. 3) 'Not for us?' synthesis of work on 'a new phase of capitalism' so clearly visible for anyone '[b]eyond the bowels of Davos' provides further evidence that '[m]aterialisms, old and new, are being reconceptualised' through the world urban system (see also Mayer 2012; Peck 2012; Merrifield 2012). Antagonistic class relations are indisputably part of this process. To the degree that the professoriate represents one small part of 'the collective accumulated powers of intellectual labor in urban society' (Merrifield 2012, 282), we suggest that it is wise to invest some of that labour-power to 'create connections and coalitions across different urban divides' and to mobilize 'critical urban theory to penetrate the obfuscations and help identify the real bases for our alliances in struggle …' (Mayer 2012, 483). Attention, class.

Notes

1 As Brenner, Marcuse, and Mayer (2009) have argued, the need for critical theory in urban research should hardly need to be re-affirmed, with cities serving as 'major basing points for the production, circulation and consumption of commodities, and [consequently] their evolving internal sociospatial organization, governance systems and patterns of socio-political conflict must be understood in relation to this role' (178).

2 For anyone familiar with labour history, it will be evident that this form of analysis has been consistently challenged by various elements of the Left since the inception of 'Marxism'.

3 This dynamic is well illustrated for part of the working classes in Watt's (2013, 114) analysis of East London ex-tenants who used the Right-to-Buy option, but who are now 'trying to preserve, either symbolically or literally, a sense of their homes and neighbourhoods as constituting a place with positive meaning—a community …' While these owner-occupiers 'appeared to benefit from the Thatcherite expansion of the "property-owning democracy"', their 'inclusion … has turned out to be chimerical. Despite investing in their homes in terms of both use value and exchange values, the latter are simply inadequate relative to the potential returns that *could* be achieved if the land is parcelled up and sold off for higher-value property development.'

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