Paper presentation

Abstract title: The symbolic power of class: Individualisation and young working-class identities

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Abstract:
This paper critically engages with recent arguments that individualisation processes are breaking down traditional class structures, which leads to increased reflexivity among people to choose and to construct their identities. Drawing on multi-method ethnographic research conducted in a marginalised area on the outskirts of South London, the paper explores processes of identity formation among the white working-class youths in the area. The study shows that most respondents, and particularly the local style or fashion adopted among residents in the area, are positioned in the stigmatising discourse on ‘chavs’, which is a recent widespread term that has been used to pathologise white British working-class youths adopting certain markers of taste. Moreover, it is demonstrated that respondents strongly disidentify with the term and apply it on others, although this is sometimes bound up with tensions and ambiguities. In this way, it is much easier for the respondents to distance themselves from the chav label on a discursive level, than on the level of social practices, including their tastes and lifestyles. Even while disidentifying with chavs, they might still be positioned in the codes and narratives constructed around the term. This shows that the respondents cannot simply choose their identities since they are structured by class and constructed in relation to the categorizations made by others. It is also shown that the appropriation of local taste reflects an individualised rather than collective form of consumption. This points to a more general pattern of class formation in
the contemporary moment, namely that individualisation is a fundamentally classed process. In conclusion, the paper demonstrates the symbolic power of class in shaping identity formation.