



Telling Tales Out of Class

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“Class is dead”, we are told. All we need to do now is think smart and connect.

There’s nothing new about myth-making. The interesting thing, however, is to trace the development of myths to the economic conditions that give rise to them.

There’s a powerful myth floating around today: the *social capital myth*.

Social capital? Isn’t that just a way of measuring the levels of trust and collaboration in the community? Or is there more to the story?

Big businesses around the world are pursuing (through governments) a two-pronged plan to maximise profits: 1) the undermining of unions as collective representatives of workers, and 2) the dismantling of social security for working class families.

Unions are being systematically undermined. The worker is no longer a member of the *working class* but an individual consumer in the labour market who is meant to go where the jobs are and buy in the necessary training to get those precious jobs. That’s why education (for whatever age group) becomes too valuable a commodity to be supplied freely.

As for social security (or *welfare dependence* as some like to call it), we are presently witnessing its dismantling. As each welfare service is dismantled, its broken pieces are sold off to the private sector and the service itself is magically transformed into a commodity (almost inevitably with government financial support for the company!).

The great government closing-down sale is not, however, limited to welfare services. Health, education, housing, transport, prisons, anything and everything, can be subjected to the logic of the market.

The role of government is no longer, even in a minimal sense, to ensure some measure of equitable distribution of human necessities. It is now quite nakedly committed to providing welfare for the rich and greater pressure on the swollen ranks of unemployed and working poor to work for bottom dollars.

This is where the *social capital myth* comes in handy. It posits social connectedness as an *alternative* to material infrastructure, employment and social security. Its bottom line is that ‘citizens’ should look to themselves to find solutions to the problems created by big business. If, perchance, people can’t work things out for themselves they can always find a nice, albeit mandatory, home in prison.

The notion of *social capital* is used to denote the building of trust between business, government and community. It is posited as the way forward for acting responsibly (and cheaply) to cope locally with global change. It is pitted against the Welfare State as a method that embraces free choice, individual initiative, mutual obligation and fiscal responsibility.

Issues of material infrastructure are replaced by issues of cultural change. Conflictual realities are moved around (between neighbourhood, prison and workplace) but they do not disappear. However you want to paint it, the owners of capital are systematically attacking the working class.

The state grows smaller so that ‘the community’ can grow stronger. Non-government organisations are touted as the answer to the vacuum left by government. We are told that the community is actually being empowered by the move away from public ownership of resources.

The *social capital myth* presents us with a garden of Eden from which we have fallen and which we can re-enter if only we have trust in each other.

Then prisons will be empty and stomachs will be full.

If only we realised this earlier. Silly us!