



Beverley Skeggs

On the economy of moralism and working-class properness

An interview with Beverley Skeggs

Sofie Tornhill & Katharina Tollin: This issue of *Fronesis* deals with feminism and the Left. How do you position your work in relation to those "entities"?

Beverley Skeggs: Definitely feminist, definitely left! But what is difficult is that we have lost the political parties that were left in Britain and also there is no kind of formal Left in public culture. Although practically everyone I know would define themselves as on the left, it is quite a homeless position. And it worries me because if you only do criticism, it doesn't always produce very much. The shift has been so great within the Left. After 30 years of neoliberal policy that was taken up and taken further by Tony Blair, or Tony Blatcher as he is called, the left space is something difficult to inhabit.

ST & KT: What points of collision and intersections do you see between feminism and the Left?

BS: I think there were some fantastic moments when feminists wrote about how to reconstruct the welfare state. But I think much about class and gender has been falsely separated. For myself, I do not think that I could do feminism without socialism; it is in my blood almost. How could you analyze anything without analyzing capital? It structures everything, even us being here now. I could not imagine class, gender, and race being separate in that way. I sometimes think it is sad that feminists went off and created their own spaces in academia — fantastic spaces that were needed, politically, for a time but they became very separate. I went into those spaces and fought quite a lonely battle to put class on the agenda. If I had taken a non-feminist route and stayed in sociology it would have been much easier. I think it was historically necessary but those spaces easily get cramped and have now started to close down. That does not mean that feminism is not there, but rather we see feminists going back to the more traditional disciplines that are also being reshaped. So for me, when going back to sociology, I thought that finally I would not have to fight about class any longer. But I found myself starting to fight about gender and sexuality! It is all because of this weird academic organization premised on interest.

ST & KT: Your books and articles all centre on relations of class and gender.¹ Has your understanding of these categories been somehow altered along the way?

BS: Yes they have, in the sense that I shifted from a structural, more traditional Marxist position, to a much more post-structural one. I was taught structural Marxism and I still believe that the basic organization of society is premised upon labour, class organization, and capital. So the focus probably shifted as I started to feel dissatisfied with Marxism. Probably every feminist on the left can agree on this: Marxism never really captures gender. And now I have almost come full circle as I am back to work on issues of emotional labour. When we look at Reality TV, what we see is humiliation and contempt of working-class women for their inability to perform certain types of labour. They are shown as not respectable or proper, and this is remarkably similar to the imposition of the middle-class domestic ideology onto working-class women at the beginning of industrialization. It almost mirrors the Victorian puritanical, religious, ideological movement.

Another difference is that I began with a strong concept of ideology and then worked it through post-structuralism and got into discourses. But now, I think, I am going back to ideology. What is happening is so profoundly repeated, structured, and patterned it looks like an ideology. It is not being imposed directly by the state but it is the patterns and repetitions that makes it so prevailing, and I do not think that this discourse is powerful enough, as a concept, to explain what is happening morally. I think that the turn to culture was an attempt to give value to that which was seen to be pointless, to bring some things in from the margins. But I sometimes feel that we may have turned too far and have lost a lot of the basics around the economy or capital. I am quite interested in some of the new debates around affective labour or immaterial labour. They often come from a male Left, Hardt and Negri and the Italian autonomous Marxist movement, but they are in fact premised upon an analysis of women's labour, emotional labour, the kind of labour that women have always been doing. Now it is important to hold together Marxism and feminism, in order to think through how it is that labour is again being moralized in such a powerful way. So although I have changed in a sense, it has brought me back to very similar things. Also, although I keep thinking that I am not going to write on class anymore and work on something else, it always comes back. The book *Class, Self, Culture* was supposed to be called "Visible Classifications" and to be about the processes of lots of different classifications through the visual. But it turned out to be a book about the middle classes in Britain.

ST & KT: When are the tensions between feminism and Marxism productive and when are they destructive?

BS: I think they are very productive when different histories of struggles are brought together and destructive when there is a lack of connection or dismissal. Lots of academic training is centred on learning how to trash other people: look instead to what we can use and not what we can destroy! Also in the context of the hierarchical academic system where the "good" departments at the "good" universities are extremely bourgeois because of the amounts of cultural capital required to enter. When you talk about class you tend to be regarded as a dinosaur *still* going on about that. Yes, I *am* still going on about it because if you look at how the working class is being demonized, if we look at the 300 new criminal laws, 59 new civil laws, in the UK you see that there are reasons to do so! That polemical gesture is necessary but it seems to be almost archaic in some respects because people that occupy a comfortable space do not want to be reminded that things are really horrible for other people; it reminds them of their powerlessness.

ST & KT: Today, class has been approached in a new way, as one of many categories that are subject to oppression both in the context of identity politics and in relation to the concept of intersectionality. How can this be understood?

BS: You just hit off on a whole lecture against intersectionality! Because if you focus on identity it is about making a claim *through* respectability, staging resources in a particular way. As Wendy Brown notes, identity claims are based on some type of injury or suffering, often a dramatic suffering of some kind. And for me, identity politics could never work because if you are working class you suffer continuously and the one thing that you do *not* want to display is your injury and your suffering. You want to display your capacity to survive and endure, to struggle against and to overcome. To celebrate your injury, suffering, pain, or victimhood does not work for the working-class... I think that with the focus on identity the whole thing shifted away from injustice into individuality as a form of capital. In *Formations of Class and Gender*, I wrote about women that did not want to be identified as working class because what it meant was to be pathologized; to be seen as excessively sexual, as bad mothers and so forth. They did not and could not use identity. With identity politics we see the middle classes again claiming all the resources for themselves, for example claiming to be victims of violence and in need of all kinds of security arrangements such as gated communities, tax breaks and so on. It is not only about resources but about the political agenda as well, it is a way for the middle class to claim injury and suffering when they have everything.

So when people say that we need the intersectional gesture to include race, class, gender, and everything else, what it usually means is to think about these things which *exclude* understandings of the relationship to the capitalist system. When we did research on sexuality it was obvious how important respectability was to making a claim by sexuality. If your life is positioned around not being respectable, you do not want to make claims through respectability. I do not think that you can easily put categories together: they have entirely different logics. The logic of class would be, as Žižek argues, the abolition of the middle classes, not the people but the class structure. The logic of race is similar. But the logic of feminism is not, apart from in the Scum manifesto in the 1970s, advocating the eradication of men as such.² It may be about the refiguring of gender relations, but then again others argue it is not about sexual differences. Anyhow, they are different logics that have different relations to capital, and are shaped by capital in very different ways. I think that to just slam them together is to not do the hard work that is required on those different categories.

ST & KT: In the Swedish context, it was as if issues of race, ethnicity entered more broadly through the discussion of intersectionality.

BS: You have such a different history. There are different historical moments, different national historical moments. I can see how it would work in Sweden if you have not had those discussions before. After the violent struggles that we have had around race and class, I think that we are much more careful of lumping things together because we know they do not work in the same way. But if they are not on the agenda and the debates bring them on, then it is good.

ST & KT: As long as it does not bring them on and off at the same time?

BS: Yes, and I think that is sort of how the work is done. Black feminists in the 70s were doing what is almost a Swedish gesture now: saying, let's think about race, which is important. But it is really hard to think these things through, how they are lived. You can not separate them out because people are not separate; just a woman or just a class position. But if we theorize them through the abstract rather than through lived experience, it is really complex thinking about the systems or logics that produce how we live them all together.

ST & KT: How do you relate to different types of categorizations in your work?

BS: I have talked about using thematics that can tie things together. Respectability works in that way. I came across it really by accident as I was thinking of how to explain what it is to be a white, working-class woman in Britain at a particular moment. And it was all lived through respectability. So then I thought; how do I explain this? What is producing respectability as important or significant? Why is it that respectability holds together all those different ways of being in one body? What produces the desire to be respectable? — Having value, I'd argue. Which is why the book *Class, Self, Culture* is all about having value, retaining value and extracting value. It takes the debates about living respectability to its abstract-structural level, to the examination of the organization of culture as we live it through our "selves".

ST & KT: So the concept of respectability grew on you as you were doing ethnographic research?

BS: Yes, it was not there at the beginning at all. At the beginning I was looking at responses to the media and how the women were doing caring courses. It was a feminist critique of Althusser's use of ideology and I thought that these women were living much more interesting lives than just soaking up the ideology of femininity. Femininity is very interesting, it is so heavily symbolically structured across every site, but it has no value. If it is so symbolically powerful it should, with Bourdieu, have capital value. But it doesn't, only locally. The structural explanation can show how the women in the study ended up on those horrific caring courses, but not so much how they live in these conditions. That is why we need not only ethnography, but also abstract structural understandings about why they occupy the positions they have to live.

I never thought respectability would stay with me because I actually hate respectability! My mother is so invested in respectability; I have spent my whole life trying not to be respectable, though in the end I always give in. But then with the media obsession with the hen party thing, respectability was written all over it, and Reality-TV is respectability on a massive scale. What I have done more recently is to connect it to the proper. Respectability can be regarded as the ordering of society through the proper which is a legal organization, giving an incredible foundation to respectability. Who can become a proper person? Who seems to be a legitimate subject of the state? Respectability is not only about cleaning your house but also, literally, about existing as a citizen. That brought me into the question of how the middle class in Britain keeps accruing property for themselves, not just through buying property but through having the right cultural capital which they then can convert into the future and extend themselves in society; to have more influence, have more contacts, have more mobility, adding exchange value to themselves in the same way capital works through exploitation: accumulation.

It is always a future project and this is what I am interested in now, people who project themselves into the future and accrue value to themselves — the accumulation of respectability. But who can accrue value and how can they do it?

ST & KT: *Formations of class and gender* has received a lot of attention. Did it surprise you that respectability proved to be such a useful concept?

BS: Yes. It was a theme that emerged through the writing; it was the instinct that was there in the ethnographic research and it is something that I have always lived. In a way, when I was living and being with the women, I was much more interested in their oppositional approaches. They were almost trapped into those systems of caring but were very creative and did not give authority to them. When I started to write about respectability I was very worried at first because it seemed that they were doing what was expected of them. But they were not. When I thought really carefully about it and looked through the quotes I saw that they were doing a very different sort of respectability.

Some people say that *Formations of Class and Gender* is about working-class women wanting to become middle class, which misses the point entirely. They want to have value. They definitely do not want to be middle class and they do not want to be what they are expected to be, to be pathologized, but they want to have value. The Reality-TV project is about this. Who can be a proper person? Who can have value? In a way this is completely Marxist and if you go back to old Marx you see that he talks a lot about personality and property, so he actually makes that connection himself. He talks about which goods matter, which are inalienable goods and which are alienable. He is talking about use value and what matters to him, not just which ones you can exchange. He is on to it, but then he never develops it, in a personal way. He develops it into a fantastic theory of capital... I can see why *Formations...* was successful in Sweden now that I've lived here. It is such a respectable society; it's the most highly regulated place I've ever experienced. Much more so than the UK, where deviance, violence, innovation and a great deal of challenge of bourgeois authority is so much more visible.

ST & KT: In the article published by *Fronesis*, you argue for the importance of use value.³ Why?

BS: The reason I argue for use value is because of what we see in the British and American societies today, and what we see in social theories on subjectivities, in Foucault when he writes on the care of the self, in Nick Rose, Bauman and Bourdieu, interestingly enough. The common denominator here is the notion that in order to have value you have to invest in yourself, or take care of yourself as Foucault puts it. You have to work on yourself. That investment is about bringing in proper culture, proper value and learning cultural capital. So you keep accruing value to yourself. Now, this is how British society seems to work at the moment especially when it comes to education. Middle-class education is all based on children learning more and more, being more and more skilled, and playing more and more instruments. They have to keep on equipping themselves with value. All those forms of culture have an exchange value in the future and can be used or exchanged.

Use value, on the other hand, is when you are not really interested in accumulating exchange value. You are just interested in something for its use.

Rather than being oriented towards the future, use value is more rooted in the present. For example there is a nice kind of contrast between hedonism and controlled hedonism, described by Chris Griffin. She describes young working-class women on a hedonistic night out: they do not care what happens, they are just going to have a laugh. Then there is controlled or calculated hedonism where people work out the limits to their hedonism so that they are not late for work the next day. Use value is about not caring. The latter is thinking about productivity, relations at work and all that sort of stuff. So I think that use value has an entirely different approach. The women who did respectability in *Formations of Class and Gender* were not doing it to increase value in the future. They were doing respectability because they like to have a clean house now. It is like a defence against devaluation. So I thought that use value might be a useful way of thinking that distinction through Marx. But it always worries me to think in binaries: what else is there? I think that there is a scale between use and exchange value. It is not one or the other. The exchange mechanism is based on what can be converted, the rate, so you can keep using those capital metaphors.

Now I am doing another project, called "Contingencies and Values". It is about groups that are not very likely to ever get a job, or whose possibilities are really limited. I look at three groups: ex-offenders, who are unlikely to get a job in Britain because they have been to prison so often and have either drug or drink problems; 80+ old ladies who are not investing in their future and, finally, very young working-class mothers who, again, might not get a job, but also do not want the type of jobs that are accessible to them. So I am trying to look at groups whose possibilities of exchange are limited and ask what matters to them. It has been really interesting for it comes back to things like respect and respectability. And they are not articulated in the same way as when they are future oriented. The old ladies are great; they become totally disinterested in respectability. They say things like: "We've spent all our lives cooking and cleaning and now we're going to have a good time!" They're my role models! Something different is produced when you do not have to defend yourself against judgments and not continuously invest in the future. You can live differently and different things matter. I am trying to look at what matters to people when you're not just completely invested in the future. Or defending the past and present.

ST & KT: How do you look at the relationship between economic value and discursive value?

BS: I think I see them all as kind of discursive products. I see the economy as a completely discursive object. That's why I think the concept of value becomes important. Economy is the way value is organized. So if you look at how value is organized you get all sorts of different aspects of the economy.

ST & KT: Is this what you refer to when you write that you want "to move beyond Marx but still *with* Marx"?

BS: Yes. I am always surprised how I keep going back. It must be 30 years since I first read Marx and I still go back and just find things, really interesting bits. I read this fantastic article, "Marx's Coat", by Peter Stallybrass on the fetishism of culture. It looks as if people are cultural, but the amount of labour invested in their childhood is phenomenal. So it looks as if they are musical, but they have been forced since the age of two to play a musical instrument. It is about fetishism, the relation between labour, talent and creativity. So I went back to Marx to read about fetishism and his own obsession with his clothes

and his wine. That made me realize how much he wanted a good life and he wanted it for everybody. It is important to see that in the harder economic analysis. What has always interested me is how people in difficult conditions always try to make things nice for others. It's impossible to do an interview or visit working-class people in the UK and not be fed! They bring out their best cakes. And if you go to Marx, he's like that when he writes about how much he likes champagne... Wouldn't we all, if we could afford it!

ST & KT: You write about how women are positioned as abject in Reality TV. But are some representations potentially subversive in giving way to new political spaces or positions? Could it also be regarded as important that working-class women are made visible as subjects or that experiences and behaviours that have not previously been shown on TV are suddenly present?

BS: Hopefully, yes. At first, I was horrified by the moralizing in the programs which are usually produced by the middle class with a particular image of how the working classes behave and set them up. The subject positions are pretty fixed and cast to fit "the useless mother" and "the bad cleaner". But what is fantastic, and it came out of our research, is that a lot of the participants refuse the positions. They completely refuse the authority of the moralizing structure. It is a bit like in *Formations of class and gender*. If you told one of the women that I interviewed how to bath a baby for example, they would react like: "What?! Who are you to tell me what to do?" In Reality TV, we see how the moral authority of the middle class is being challenged. I think that the complete refusal of any kind of judgment has its good and bad sides. Some of the women that we have interviewed have just been like "whatever!". They think that morality is just there for other people. They refuse to recognize the negative portrayal of people like themselves on these programmes. So it is a refusal of authority and a refusal to be recognized, or rather misrecognized, as the bad, improper person.

The downside is that when they *do* get absorbed in moral judgments and moral authority it often contains terribly reactionary judgments on other women. They might be young mothers that have little chance of ever getting a job or they can only get jobs that exploit them. Yet, they judge mothers on television who go to work as bad. So there is a traditional moral judgment taken by the ones who literally have no future. Or rather, they have a good time with their children but at the same time they know what they are meant to be, how they are seen. So they hold on tightly to their moral authority as mothers. They look after their children properly, full time, at home. That is their only source of moral authority. And simultaneously there are political initiatives that aim to get them back on the labour market, to horrific work for minimum wage. What is the choice? To stay at home with your babies and your mates who do not work either or go to work where they treat you like shit? It's an easy choice as there is very little difference economically. But the problem is that the choice is locking them into a position that is hard to leave.

ST & KT: Returning to Reality TV, how can it be put into a wider perspective? Why is it so pleasurable to watch people on TV that are wrong or disgust us?

BS: I was just talking to Maria Karlsson who works on melodramas.⁴ A lot of these TV programmes are exactly that; tiny domestic situations blown up to enormous melodrama. She says that melodrama usually gets strongly amplified when there is a real crisis in the society over authority, in situations of loss of faith. This links to theories of subjectivity which argue that faith is invested in

the self rather than in religious or political institutions. We are living in a society where people are horrified by its politics. You can have millions of people protesting against the war in Iraq and the whole government protesting but the Prime Minister still goes to war. Nobody has any impact anymore. It creates disillusion. Reality TV fits the reaction of "whatever". That is when we get melodramas that are funny and entertaining freak shows (alongside the political economy of digital television demands for cheap programmes). It is seen as low culture, as women's TV and it is seen to be destroying British culture. This is very interesting since Reality TV is the most moral thing that you can watch on television.

But I think what Reality TV really exposes is what the middle class thinks of the working class in the UK. And that is that they are objects of spectacle and humiliation and objects of fun. And that the working class is unpredictable. So to me, what Reality TV does is to expose the fantasies and projections of the middle classes. The same fantasies that middle-class cultural critics review and think is terrible. So the debate about Reality TV takes place *among* the middle class and is *about* the middle class, and the working class is the object of this projection.

When we interviewed young working-class women about Reality TV, we asked them if they would go on it, and they said "yeah of course". It is another way of getting money. One of them had been on and she said: "It was great, they put me in a taxi and I'd never been in a taxi before and I stayed in a hotel, I'd never stayed in a hotel before and they gave me presents." For her that was fantastic. She was a single mom at the age of fourteen. They ridiculed her, but she didn't mind. Her view was that she had made a mistake when she was 14, she was criticized but had a really good weekend. And she would go on again. So that is a different approach. I think the subversive element is precisely to refuse any moral authority of the middle classes. This has to be put in relation to ongoing changes in the political culture and public life where the legal system tries to criminalize the lack of respect for the middle classes and moral authority. There are social projects in Britain which aim to teach good manners ("The Respect Agenda" — check the website!) which repeats the Victorian domestic ideology and is seen as a great joke by the working class.⁵ This says something about the dislocation of values and increased conflicts in society.

ST & KT: How do you understand the changes in class and gender formations in a larger global context and in relation to the international division of labour?

BS: What Britain today represents is the European version of neoliberalism at its height. We have had 30 years of neoliberalism where the private is now totally public and you see these massive contradictions opening up through globalization. The British nation has been opened up to capital. What you see happening in class terms is the deepened division between white and black workers and you see the figure of "the terrorist" after 9/11 which draws a line against Asian workers. So the imperial history that forced people to come and work in Britain during the 1960s and 1970s has always had a massive impact on trade union struggles and shaped what is known to be class in Britain. It would be impossible to talk about race without class because the majority of the black and South Asian population in the UK is working class. So we have this shaping of the working class through the empire and imperialism that is now being shaped by neoliberalism and its new imperial geopolitics.

The formation of the black and white working class is a lot about possible responses to neoliberalism. Neoliberalism relies on the notion of the individual creating its own value. It also creates images of those that lack value in the capitalist system, the illegitimate subjects of the nation. Now we have an expanding service sector. White and black working-class men do not want to be involved in it because the service sector is associated with women. The service sector relies upon the display of obedience and docility, femininity almost. So black and white working-class men are expected to suddenly become such subjects of capital. It is almost impossible. In relation to the history of imperialism and its resistances, this represents a powerful block to neoliberal politics. But what has happened is that we get a massive gender division because women can do the service work and they are doing it. We also have divisions among Asian workers depending upon, among other things, the history of their entry to Britain. We have very powerful women's groups working in the factories, unionized women who organize strikes. And then you got the more traditional new communities, so there are differences in how they respond to neoliberalism.

And finally we have a government that no one respects, trying to force people who are not docile to become docile and respectful. What's interesting with films that have tried to portray this crisis such as *Brassed off* and *The Full Monty* is that they picture men as the willing subjects of the new order. But in fact, I think that there is a massive unwillingness, men that do not want to be docile. Think of the history of black male youth popular culture; it's about being hard and heavy and violent. What does the service industry require? It doesn't fit.

ST & KT: What political implications does your work on value and respectability have? What should we, as socialists and feminists, focus on?

BS: I think there is a real need for us to focus on how authority is being played out and fought. Who is given authority and who wants authority? It is about work, what people do, and that has a big impact. I am fascinated by the cleaners in the City. They are illegal but have managed to be unionized and they have actually gone on strike for better conditions and better wages. And that is almost unheard of for illegal workers. They use some form of religious claims for respectability and justice. Here, many things are brought together. Many illegal workers, mainly women, demand respectability because that is what the British Empire was all about, supposedly. And the economy relies on migrant workers. So we see an ex-empire that is being exposed to people who come in and claim colonial values using respectability in their own ways as a strategy to demand their rights.

Last year there was a global strike against a company — Gate Gourmet — that provides the food for international planes. There was a big strike in the US and there was a big strike in London and we all went out to Heathrow airport. But of course, it's Britain, and the police came to move everyone five miles away. There are so many laws to stop any union activity. But, you can imagine it; this big hill at Heathrow was just covered by Asian women. And that was a moment when you realize that this all is not as it seems. People are doing stuff, often because they have to, we just don't know about it. That is quite important to remember. So for me, political implications are a matter of looking for such things, rather than assuming that resistance happens in ways that I already know. And it is a matter of thinking of people who are not investing in the future and to see how life can be lived radically differently.

- ¹ For instance, see *Formations of class and gender: Becoming respectable* (Sage 1997), *Class, self, culture* (Routledge 2004), and 'The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation', in *Sociology*, vol 39 no 5 (2005).
- ² Valerie Solanas, *Scum Manifesto* (A.K. Press 1997).
- ³ The referred text is the translation of "The making of class and gender through visualizing moral subject formation", in *Sociology*, vol 39 no 5 (2005), appearing in *Fronesis* no 25–26.
- ⁴ Maria Karlsson is a researcher at Centre for Gender Studies, Uppsala University, Sweden.
- ⁵ www.respect.gov.uk

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