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BOOK REVIEW

Tyler, Imogen (2020). *Stigma, The Machinery of Inequality*. Zed Books, 368 pages.

Instances of social stigma have been accumulating especially in the new millennium, and have culminated with the pandemic, which has added yet more social stigmas to the global picture, about the infected, the unvaccinated, but also geographical regions and whole countries quarantined in the tempest of covid-19. It is therefore an appropriate time to rethink the sociology of stigma and especially “state-cultivated stigma” (p. 7), which this book investigates. After years of “othering” based on gender, sexuality, race, origin, health, and whatever else white supremacist politics have inspired, the new millennium is replete with new axes of stigmatization, which have sparked public opposition and anti-stigma campaigns and mobilizations, such as “heads together”, anti-austerity, “me too”, “black lives matter”, solidarity with refugees crossing borders... What is at stake is human dignity and cases of assault to it are piling up to enhance the relevance of this book.

The author has written extensively on the sociology and the political economy of stigma. She considers this book as a sister project to her book *Revolted Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (2013), which developed a theoretical account of “social abjection” as a means of critically engaging with the politics of disposability that characterises neoliberalism (p. 18). She embarks here on a project to supersede the dominant psychological understanding and research methods, to “decolonise stigma” within the discipline of sociology (p. 23), by interrogating major theorists and concepts. She seeks to both delineate the limitations

of existing conceptual understandings of stigma – putting class struggle and racism at the centre – and to develop an account of how stigma functions as a form of power. She investigates the mechanisms by which stigma is produced, by whom, and for what purposes, in line with Parker and Aggleton’s (2003) social and political emphasis on how stigma is used by individuals, communities and the state to produce and reproduce social inequality.

This may reach the point of governmental “weaponizations of stigma” reproducing imperatives of financial capitalism (Scambler, 2018), especially in times of austerity (Leontidou, 2014, 2021), or even of geopolitics, in the case of migration. During the global financial crisis since 2008, processes as diverse as welfare retrenchment, labour precarity, eviction, displacement, social cleansing, and gentrification were put in place (p. 19), and are now, 15 years later, amplified with anti-migrant politics and punitive citizenship regimes, the proliferation of internal borders and violent bordering practices (p. 19). With “an understanding of stigma as a material force, a structural and structuring form of power”, this author “develops a more psychopolitical understanding of stigma, reconceptualizing stigma as a form of power that is written on the body and gets under the skin” (p. 9). She also seeks an “understanding of how stigma is propagated as a governmental technology of division and dehumanization” (p. 7) and opens up social and political questions about the escalation of social inequality.

The introduction refers to all of the above objectives of the book, giving examples of stigmatization and especially of the “welfare stigma machine”, in an account that reminds us of Ken Loach’s film *“I Daniel Blake”*. People depending on welfare are stigmatized for “stealing your taxes” (p. 5) and are profoundly affected in their sense of self and dignity. As in a previous article (Tyler and Slater, 2018), the author also thinks critically with and about the high-profile anti-stigma campaign “Heads Together”, launched in 2016 to “end the stigma around mental health” (p. 241). She argues that to grasp the role and function of stigma in society, scholarship must develop a richer and fuller understanding of stigma as a cultural and political economy. The chapters in the book cut a series of historical slices through stigma power, tracing how stigma has been exercised in the past to govern populations through degrading forms of marking’ (p. 20). As Foucault (Rabinow, 1991, p. 83) puts it, bodies manifest “the stigmata of past experience”; the task is to expose how bodies are “totally imprinted by history”.

In chapter 1, “The penal tattoo”, draws on a long line of violent practices of marking and public shaming to discuss stigma written on bodies, tattoos on subjects to demonstrate rules,

laws, norms. “The instruments used to impress stigma on the other extend from bloody implements of state violence to more symbolic forms of public shaming, including stigmatising visual and textual representations in popular media” (p. 34) and now social networks. This way of understanding stigma as a form of power written on the body results in a rich and expansive history of stigma as an inscriptive form of power.

In chapter 2, “From stigma power to black power”, familiar understandings of stigma in the social sciences are discussed, inherited from the pioneering account of stigma (1963/ 1986) by the celebrated sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–1982). Works that followed tended to conceive of stigma as a social problem that can be overcome through education, by changing individual attitudes, and/or by teaching the stigmatised how to better manage the stigma pinned on them (p. 17). To address this obvious absence of power, the author resituates Goffman’s book within the historical context of the political movements taking place while he was writing it. Goffman’s decidedly apolitical account of stigma preceded the US civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s. The author here proposes a critical revision through an understanding of stigma as power, in line with Link and Phelan’s (2014) concept of “stigma power”, which describes the role played by stigma in the “exploitation, control or exclusion of others”. Racism is brought to the centre of understandings of stigma and it is recognized that stigma is deployed in ways that seek to amplify ‘existing inequalities of class, race, gender, and sexuality’ (Parker and Aggleton, 2003, p. 17).

In chapter 3, “The stigma machine of the border”, there is an analysis of state racism, especially of the Czech and Hungarian governments, that followed the 2015 so-called refugee crisis. It examines how the humanitarian crisis triggered by refugee arrivals at the borders in Central and Eastern Europe mutated into a “racist crisis” as migrants were made the focal point for anxieties about national identity and security. This racist crisis splintered liberal tolerance and social solidarity across the region. “Nazi-era colonial fascism re-emerged and converged in public responses to the 2015 refugee crisis, as the racially stigmatised bodies of refugees were employed, both literally (through their incarceration in camps) and metaphorically (in political propaganda and public speech), to mark out the borders of the white nation” (p. 25).

Chapter 4, “The stigma machine of austerity” deals with a painfully familiar issue, at least for the EU periphery: stigma for whole countries which approached Orientalism, reproducing uneven development (Leontidou, 2014). Here, however, the author does not touch

upon austerity in the Mediterranean. She draws on her experiences of working as part of the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission and discusses austerity as a breaking point from welfare to post-welfare capitalism in Britain. Austerity was implemented through a ‘welfare stigma machine’ which corroded institutions, the design of social policies, and infected the culture, practices, and attitudes of welfare workers. This “welfare stigma” pushed citizens into believing that people living in poverty had chosen their fates and deserved cuts to social provision, disenfranchisement, and shame. Such “stigma-optics” altered ways of seeing poverty and hardened people’s feelings towards the suffering in food queues or the homeless on street corners and doorways (pp. 196-7). It is impossible to avoid adding here a note on the colonial, and debilitating Mediterranean experience of “weaponization of stigma” during the debt crisis. In the 2010s, not only people were stigmatized as lazy and corrupt, but the whole EU periphery was targeted, as it was sinking into debt: the so-called PIIGS (Leontidou 2014, 2021). The Orientalist narratives about Greeks in particular, and the pressures towards “Grexit”, basically devalued a whole nation and reproduced uneven development.

The most self-reflective section of the book is chapter 5, “Shame lives on the eyelids”. The author proposes to draw on our stigma injuries and stigma struggles to research and write about stigma from autobiographical fragments, in ways that don’t reproduce or naturalise existing stigmatizing social hierarchies (p. 213).

Chapter 6 constitutes the conclusion of the book, entitled “Rage against the stigma machines”. It starts with royal involvement in “Heads together” and goes on, to sum up, the main themes of this important book, at times touching and unsettling. It is dedicated by the author to the Morecambe Bay Poverty Truth Commission for its humanity and practices of social solidarity. Besides power relations and the reproduction of social inequalities, there is yet a lot to say about the stigmatization of places, communities, and whole nations as an undercurrent of uneven development. In the author’s words (p. 27), “What stigma devalues are people and the places where they live. What stigma destabilises are local communities and social bonds. What stigma shortens is lives”.

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