Beverley Skeggs: refusing to be worn out[1]

Beverley Skeggs: recusando-se a ser vencida pelo cansaço

Interview with BEVERLEY SKEGGS[a]

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BEVERLEY SKEGGS WAS born in Middleborough, England. She studied at York (BA) and Keele (where she obtained a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and a PhD), and has worked professionally at Crewe and Alsager College of Higher Education, at the Worcester College of Higher Education (Sociology) and at the universities of York, Lancaster and Manchester. Since 2004, Skeggs has been working at the Department of Sociology of Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research is related to the areas of Women's Studies, Cultural Studies and Sociology. Skeggs says that all her work approaches the theme of "value and values" and that the analyses made in her works are based on feminist and poststructuralist theories, especially on the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Karl Marx. Since September 2013, she has been leading the research project *A sociology of values and value*, which is studying the formation of value and values that are made by but that also escape the logic of capitalism.

Her publications include *The Media* (1992), *Cultural Feminist Theory* (1995) *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997), *Class, Self, Culture* (2004), *Sexuality and the Politics of Violence and Safety* (2004) (in partnership with Les Moran, Paul Tyrer and Karen Corteen) and *Feminism After Bourdieu* (with Lisa Adkins). She is also editor of the series of books *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*. The research project on *Class and Self through Televised Ethical Scenarios*, developed with Helen Wood, resulted in the books *Reality TV and Class* (2011) and *Reality Television: Audience, Performance, Value* (2012). Skeggs is an honorary

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Professor of sociology at Warwick University and honorary Doctor of the universities of Aalborg (Denmark), Stockholm (Sweden) and Teesside (located in her hometown). In 2003 she was elected academician of the Academy for Social Sciences (UK).

MATRIZes: You are one of the most prominent feminist and Marxist sociologists nowadays. How did it feel to achieve this status in a world dominated by neoliberal ideology and by male vision?

Beverley Skeggs: First, I don't think I'm the most prominent in anything, but I have had some power in institutions. However, it was always a struggle because there was a real resistance to studying class, especially in the late 1980's, when I finished my PhD. So, in my first book on class, the publisher did not want to have the word class in the title. It has always been very difficult. And I think I just carried on fighting. But I fought in different spaces. In sociology, to keep gender and class on the agenda. So… I don't know. It's about being determined, insisting on what you believe in and not being cut off. When people said "you should be studying postmodernism", I studied it, became critical of it, and I didn't accept it. Then people said I should be studying consumption. Again, I said "fine, I will study, but to take it apart, I will critique it". It's quite funny. I keep thinking I won't study class anymore but then I do a project on Facebook and what I find is this phenomenal amount of division between the people that Facebook sells to advertisers and those that are considered to be waste of time. So, even when I think I'm studying a technical force, what I find out is that it's all about class. So I keep returning to it inadvertently.

MATRIZes: Do you have personal reasons for doing this? For keeping class on your agenda?

Skeggs: Yes, of course. I see injustice everywhere. Everywhere. It is very difficult for me. I can't ignore it. I think some people can ignore it, but I can't. I just can't.

MATRIZes: We live in a world where information/communication is configured as an environment that structures economic, social, cultural and political practices in a globalized society. What care should scientific research take to avoid technological determinism?

Skeggs: I just think that we have a responsibility to understand the *potential picture*. We need to understand all the conditions that we inhabit and not just elements. We have to understand how they fit together and how they work so as not to reproduce technological determinism and a kind of neoliberal imagination.

MATRIZes: Some people believe, especially in Communication studies, that the media is controlling society and that their information is behind every practice. But I think that it is dangerous to think this way. Because we shouldn't forget family, church...

Skeggs: When we think about the media and all the other technical infrastructures, such as digital infrastructures, we should not forget that they exist to make a profit. So we need to think about who is benefiting from this profit and who is living on the profit the media make. The media has a phenomenally deregulated employment structure. The people who are producing the media in Britain are usually upper middle class white people who have very rich parents, because you can't live in London as a young employee unless you have very rich parents. The sector is so deregulated there is a great deal of precarious employment, so people need other sources to support them. So, we need to understand that if we want to talk about media we need to know the conditions by which the media operate and the global competition. I agree that religion and family are still important, and for some groups more important than the media.

MATRIZes: About reality shows and your research, what differences do you see between the class position taken by the participants of the programmes and the position taken by the audiences of reality shows? Sometimes I see that even the participants in the programmes are reacting in a way that just doesn't accept the rules of reality shows...

Skeggs: Completely. I will talk about what we have found from the research. The participants learn the formula of the programme before the programme and learn how to perform. So, they know that if they perform in a spectacular way they are more likely to have a career in the media. They have to make themselves famous very quickly. So they learn to perform in a very particular way and because of the terms established for entertainment they learn to perform *being bad*, being *in need of transformation*. They want to give a sensational performance in order to have a career, because they know the formula. And the audience also knows the formula. So the audience tell us: "they are going to make her cry, they are going to me make her argue, they are going to fatten them up". Everybody knows the formula, but they use it in different ways. And so where the participants knowingly reproduce themselves as subjects in need of transformation, the audience will sometimes say "no, no, they are ok, that's fine".

What was really, really, surprising and very nice about our research was how much the audience hated class humiliation. All the groups, despite their class position, hated when people were being humiliated. Even for those participants who know they have to be humiliated and shamed, the audience actually do

not like that. This is very subtle. The way this class performance is played out I think is really quite subtle. And the audience has a phenomenal knowledge of the techniques and the formula that the TV programmes use. So I think this is very complex and we need to study audiences in order to understand what is happening with television. And, in our TV research, gender, class and gender, or class and race, all produced very different responses. There will be different class responses in responses of mothers, or in responses of young black women, so it depended on how class fitted with other forms of exploitation.

MATRIZes: We are now doing research about the comments of the audiences of telenovelas in Brazil on Twitter and Facebook. Do you think is possible to capture the subjectivity by just analyzing what people are doing in social media without investigating the *real life* of the audience?

Skeggs: We compiled a group of transcripts last week about the research we are doing at the moment, because we are analyzing public speech. We analyze what people say and feel they can say in public. They know the forms of speech which are acceptable. I think Twitter is really interesting. Twitter enables hate media. It is very quick, very particular. The technology enables hate speech. I don't know if that is subjectivity. I think that subjectivity is much more complex, and that what we see on social media are snapshots of personas.

And also in our new Facebook research, we see differences between what people say they do and what they are doing. So we have been capturing that communication all the time, all this interaction. And, in fact, very few people actually engage in conversation. So people over-estimate the amount of caring and sharing that occurs. I think is quite hard to know whether that is subjectivity or not, as we cannot see it over time. We cannot draw conclusions by analyzing each act. I think is very important to see what people feel that they can say and what are the limits on speech. There are a lot of battles happening in Twitter that are interesting; for instance, about transgender at moment. So you see the different positions taken. But I'm not sure it will lead us to develop or to challenge subjectivity. Because people say one thing, and then another, then another. What we see are public performances within a particular frame.

MATRIZes: But, do you think it is important to analyse this?

Skeggs: Yes. Do you know the work of Imogen Tyler on reality TV and class? Using social media, she contacted people who had been participants on a reality TV programme, one that *condemned* young single mothers. She went online and found the young women who had been on these television programmes and then she looked at all the comments that had been made and talked to the

women about the comments and they responded. This was fantastic research. So, it depends how you use the media.

MATRIZes: In the article "Oh my goodness, I am watching reality TV!" (Skeggs; Thumim; Wood, 2008) you describe the multimethodological option you designed for the research. How important was it to combine different approaches to confer more accuracy on the data (and its interpretation) and to reduce the interference of you or other researchers in the results?

Skeggs: I really like multimethod. Maybe because I was trained as an ethnographer. My first big study was a longitudinal ethnography which always used multimethods, because I'm trying to understand the contradictions between the speech and actions of the participants over time. People say something to you, but they behave in completely different ways. So that's why I use multimethods. It is not necessarily to test the truth, it is to show that different methods produce different perspectives on knowledge. And you can put those different perspectives together and see whether they work together, or not. And that is why it is important to understand the text to begin with and to do all the interpretations before we meet other people in the context of research, so we know the frames and structures that shape how interpretations may take place. So we were constantly trying the methods against each other. There were three of us in this project. So we were always trying out interpretations of the data on each other and having discussions about it. That was really important. And we were three different researchers in terms of age, class and disciplinary training. When we were doing focus groups, text-in-action and interviews we realised that we produced significantly different interpretations and that people responded very differently to who we were. Thus we need to understand the implications of research encounters. The results depend on the people, the method and the location (both ours and the audiences).

MATRIZes: In your previous research about reality television programmes you published an article based on textual analysis of the programmes. Considering the influence of Michel Foucault, in your work does textual analysis mean what is defined by him as genealogical and archaeological methods?

Skeggs: Not really. I think the earlier research I did was very influenced by Michel Foucault. Because it was about subjectivity and class and about who could be a subject. So Foucault was always in my mind. I think that the textual analysis we did on the media was a very basic analysis of textual structures such as narratives, music, language, character. So we did a much more traditional film and media analysis of the text and not really an interrogation of the formation

of the subject from the textual as I did previously. I think we need to do a long term research project to be able to understand how subjectivity develops.

MATRIZes: We also would like to explore your methodological approach to studying Facebook. What are your methods and techniques for collecting data from digital media?

Skeggs: I'm working with a software designer on our Facebook project. He is a genius. He has designed a plug-in browser. So everybody has a plug-in attached to their browser and we can capture the data. And then he designed software to analyse it. He designed a heuristic device for advertising word counting, and he also designed software to capture images on people browsers and then we put it all together. It is a whole new world. He is also doing statistical cluster analyses. He is a post-doc researcher and also an artist who makes amazing visualizations. See the website <https://values.doc.gold.ac.uk/>. It's beautiful! So we are monitoring everything from the users of Facebook, with their permission, and we are registered developers. Again, we are working with multimethod. We are doing interviews, surveys, etc. It's a challenge for me. I'm an ethnographer, I have to learn, to be trained to use the software, but I'm not very good (laughs).

MATRIZes: Since Antonio Gramsci, many theorists have been thinking about the cultural logic of capitalism in different ways: against class or rebuilding the concept of class. Your approach to culture contests the idea of reflexivity, saying that it is mainly middle class people who have access to cultural resources and thus the agency to construct reflexive selves. In audience research that has been done in Brazil (Ronsini, 2004, 2008, 2012) youngsters, women and working class men of negotiate identities in a way that is reflexive, a reflexivity that we could call *fractured* because is made up of dominant, negotiated and oppositional representations of class. Currently, when considering youngsters of the middle and working classes, the latter are more reflexive about class inequalities. So, it seems that the reflexive self is not only something available to the bourgeoisie or petit bourgeoisie. How do you analyse this?

Skeggs: I think that there is a difference between the reflexive index given by researchers who say how reflexive people are and people who are really reflexive. Ten years ago in the UK every PhD had to have a section in their thesis which told their biographic reflexive history as a PhD student. And I reacted against that because people were telling phenomenally reflexive histories about themselves whilst doing completely unreflexive research. For that reason, I became very critical about the idea of reflexivity if it was disconnected from practice, and saw it as a very limited way to claim power. As you do, I think the

working class practice reflexivity all the time, but practical reflexivity, and they don't recognise that they do so. Bourdieu drew a difference between reflexive research practice and telling one's story. And I think that is a huge difference. I think that a lot of people misrecognize their self-telling as effective practice when it is actually just talking about themselves.

MATRIZes: Do you agree that the reflexive self is not just a characteristic of the bourgeoisie and petite-bourgeoisie?

Skeggs: It is a characteristic that bourgeoisie theorists claim, they attach themselves to the term, but I think that they misrecognize what reflexivity actually is.

MATRIZes: They misrecognize for one side and don't recognize that the working class also have a reflexive self?

Skeggs: Exactly.

MATRIZes: Your research shows that many television discourses are relational and articulated to create a negative black and white image of the working class, while the middle class woman is presented in two different ways: sometimes as authentic, sometimes as an individual who does not have control over her emotions and body. Do you think this shift towards a negative representation of middle class women is related to the loss of economic power in the middle classes because of the taxation process of the poor and middle segments by neoliberal governments?

Skeggs: I think this is about controlling the body. About making immorality recognizable on people who do not discipline their bodies. This is not necessarily class in the same way, but is very gendered and is about women who are not disciplined.

MATRIZes: Because they *causes damage* to National Health Service, for example...

Skeggs: Yes. Obesity in the West is a problem of poverty, of the loading of cheap foods with fats like palm oil. I think what we see in terms of both middle class and working class women is exactly as you say: the power of the middle class is massively declining. Their legitimacy, their authority, their moral claim is declining. Because in the Welfare State they are losing their jobs. And so, as a result, I think they now need to establish differences between themselves in terms of good and bad, and one of these distinctions is inscribed on bodies. Large bodies have become identified as immoral and usually working class.

MATRIZes: Because they are losing money (value), they need to improve their moral values.

Skeggs: Exactly.

MATRIZes: But even so the media represents large women as a problem. Do you relate this to a gender problem, rather than a class problem?

Skeggs: I think that it is more complicated. It is more about people, usually white working class women, who don't invest in their bodies properly.

MATRIZes: As you said, your work shows us that the appropriation/uses of programmes like reality shows are very different in audiences of different classes and that it was possible to identify how the denigrated defend themselves, make their lives liveable, and sustain *struggles* against middle class patterns. What kind of results can we expect from these struggles and why can't – or shouldn't – they be seen as simple resignation?

Skeggs: There are elements of resistance. I think we see more adjustments than resistance. And we see struggles where people are trying to claim value for themselves that often are, again, about the complexity around gender, class and race. Those struggles may emphasise gender values. So, they may emphasise being a good mother, at the expense of resisting class humiliation. So, trying to perform, demonstrate and gain value for being a good mother can stop them challenging class inequality. I think we can't just say that this is resistance, but we can see elements playing out in different ways and different times. I call it struggle. Many people struggle against injustice, but they are often trying to claim (working class women) moral values in order to defend against attacks upon them.

MATRIZes: They have to adjust because otherwise they can't live.

Skeggs: Exactly.

MATRIZes: You argue that contemporary theories that promote bourgeois individualism, such as that developed by Anthony Giddens, in the end, reproduce the original myth of liberalism, because they do not dedicate attention to forms of being and values that escape from the individualization process. Could you comment on that?

Skeggs: I think that the descriptions made by people like Giddens... When they say "we are all subjects of individualism", that is *the* great statement of neoliberalism. This is both a description and a legitimisation. And the more they all affirm that this has happened to everyone, the more I say this is not universal. If we look at women in both the earlier ethnography and the media research I've

done, individualism is greatly resisted. There is a lot of care and connection and awareness about other people. Val Gillies' (2007) research looks at how working class mothers are very anti-individual, because they think individualism will make their children selfish and narrow and loaded with negative values at an early age. This is a very strong class position, very anti-individual. When I did my earlier research, young working class women used the term *individual* as an insult. If you say "she is an individual" you are saying that she is a snob, or someone who thinks she is superior. I think the theorists who are saying that individualism is universal are describing the middle class, who do like individualism because they can be individuals. Members of the middle class spend their lives trying to prove how individual they are. When you come from a very different political background, with different ideology, from different conditions, you will not invest in individualism, because it is often oppositional and also there may not be the possibility to do so. There is a big difference between who can and who cannot inhabit individuality.

MATRIZes: Don't you think that theorists have underestimated the potential of the middle class? Because the hippie movement was a middle class movement, for example... The middle class is not only about *individuals*.

Skeggs: Yes. I think that is why we now have a lot of middle class theory talking about precarity. Do you have this in Brazil? Here in the UK the middle class has really been attacked by previous and current governments. They've lost a lot of welfare jobs with a lot of middle level cuts. Because an impressive group of middle class women worked in public welfare sectors. There have been a lot of cuts in law, a lot of cuts in social work and also in social provision. And so, I believe that the middle class has experienced more insecurity. Tuition fees have been introduced in universities, for example, so they (people of the middle class) have to go into debt for their education. The London middle class is absolutely fine. Because the value of the property it owns is so high. But elsewhere the reality is absolutely critical. You see big differences occurring. The middle class is becoming more and more insecure. Nothing like the same as the working class has experienced for centuries.

MATRIZes: Well, we have a lot of difficulties understanding and defining the middle class, even academically. But it is normally described as politically and morally conservative, for example. Don't you agree that it is time to change our perspectives about the middle class?

Skeggs: That is very interesting, but I will put this in a historical picture. So, I think the middle class has always claimed its superiority through morality.

It has moral authority to rule, to judge, to legitimate. To dominate, basically. I think that moral power is highly significant in class struggle. Because the middle class vision of the law, welfare, education, the State maybe, allows the working class to be judged as undeserving. I think that the middle class put that judgment into effect. And that is what we see on television. In Britain, over the last five years, we have had a lot of TV programmes about undeserving working class people. These representations by media programmes have had a big impact on the provision of social services. So, I do want to keep a moral understanding of class differences. I think that financially the structure has changed, we have different factions within the middle class, with a professional business elite, much, much higher, etc., but they still hold the moral high ground and are still the people who set the symbolic terms. There is a great deal of research on the middle class in the UK since the turn to consumption in the 1990s. Here, in our university, on this corridor, we have two people who are studying the middle class in Britain and in France. They look at how the middle class is very anxious and as a result of that anxiety they have become much more defensive. So I think we have to understand the middle class through a historical and moral perspective as well as through changes in economic conditions.

MATRIZes: When you talk about the middle class, are you talking about the middle class as just one group?

Skeggs: Yes, I don't do stratification. I understand class as a relationship. I want to understand the morality, the struggle, and exploitation. I am still interested in how one class benefits from the labour of another. Working class women do a huge amount of servicing of middle class families (often resulting in a huge loss to their own family time). I am also interested in how one class invests in its own superiority at the expense of another, e.g. how one class defines itself as deserving more than another. That is not stratification.

MATRIZes: Why is it fundamental to have in mind exchange-values and use-values when analysing social classes, individualisation and the media in the contemporary world?

Skeggs: I think it is about shaping perspectives. The exchange-value enables one to think about who can exchange their value and in what ways, and how people can accumulate value for the future. It is a model for thinking: "how can we understand value?". The use-value is about what we care about and not about what we want to exchange, accumulate and invest in for the future necessarily. There is a difference between relationality and accumulation. We can

understand another way of thinking through the person without just thinking about accumulation, future direction and always building on capital.

MATRIZes: Your concept of *personhood*...

Skeggs: It is not mine, but from anthropology. They use personhood a lot. I took it from Marilyn Strathern, one of my heroines.

MATRIZes: Do you think that selfhood is much too bourgeois?

Skeggs: Yes. In terms of history, in terms of the law, the self is defined by exclusion. Only those who could own property – elite men – were defined as individuals and thereby owned their own selves. Up until 1960 British women could not own property. The legitimating of property ownership was achieved through connecting property to propriety. Again, moral justification was used to legitimate economic power. The idea of the self in discourses of legitimation – both religious and psychological – was about the self, the individual defined against the mass, who were the working class. They were just labour and the source of immorality. This is why historical analysis is important. The working class in the history of psychology were not accorded interiority. They were just a mass, and labour that could be exploited. When the ideology of the self and the individual was extended (and assumed to be universal), the working class did not have access to the resources, which they had always been denied, to become the bourgeois self e.g., property and propriety. Yet they are still judged as lacking. They are expected to become that to which they are denied access and this is how reality TV as one example of the public performance of self value works.

MATRIZes: In what terms can we think about autonomous working class practices or values of in a world contaminated by the ideals of the middle class and the elite?

Skeggs: That is a very hard question. We have to do ethnography and analyse carefully. We have to question the categories we use, their history and the interests by which they have been developed e.g. the self. It is the only way to find out why people do what they do. Without this we can have no idea.

MATRIZes: Do you think solidarity is maybe an autonomous working class value?

Skeggs: I think it could be one of the best, one that has resisted the sustained interpellation to become an individual and become selfish. *Look out* is a very interesting expression. When people say they "look out" for you, they mean they want to know if you are ok. That is a form of solidarity. Recently

we had a really fantastic example of solidarity in London, called the E15 (it is a postcode) campaign (have a look on Facebook). It is a group of very young mothers (16 to 18 years old) who are being thrown out of their baby homes in order to make way for super-rich apartments. They set up an amazing campaign to stay together in London. And this was amazing. They want have the right to live in London. What is happening at the moment is a lot of global elite money is ejecting the local working class so that they can build very expensive flats. Here we see autonomous working class practices, and there are many more campaigns around housing. You can't just rip young people away from their families and communities. When you look at something like that you see how values such as solidarity endure despite attempts to break them apart over decades (e.g., in the UK since Thatcher in the 1980s).

MATRIZes: What was happening was a kind of gentrification?

Skeggs: Yes. They sell the flats in Hong Kong. And they put on the advert: "no social housing". It is in these campaigns that you find autonomous working class (gendered and raced) practices. And I think that actions like this build the way to bigger struggles in the future. People learn to support each other and know that they are all in the same situation because of profit. There is a lot of solidarity there.

MATRIZes: You say that you don't want to project a "cruel optimism" in your work. Can you explain that affirmation?

Skeggs: This is the real difficulty, for me, about gender and class. "Cruel optimism" comes from Lauren Berlant (2011). She began the argument around a critique of heterosexual relationships in Hollywood films. The man in romantic films is bad but the women hopes that he is able to become good. And so this hope is an attachment to hope that is both cruel and optimistic. It is optimistic because it is hope. But it is cruel because things are never going to change. And so I was trying to work that through reality TV. Gender relationships often offer hope that things can get better whereas understanding class suggests that it is the barrier to the optimism; the Prince is not going to save you from exploitation and unemployment, for instance.

MATRIZes: In your article "Values beyond value" (Skeggs, 2014) you mention that value eclipses values and that this shrinks our sociological imagination. Where is your sociological imagination is leading you?

Skeggs: I think we get theoretically cramped all the time. Increasingly. And we have to perform all the time. Here, our academic performance is measured

all the time. So our capacity to think and act becomes restricted. We do find ways through, but we are subjected to attrition, we are being atrophied, worn out physically and mentally. Berlant also has a good paper called "Slow death" (2007). She shows how some members of the population are subject to practices that wear them out. Not the dramatic violence that we know about, but the daily activity in which we engage; eating only poor quality food is a form of slow death as it kills our organs without us noticing. I sometimes feel academia is a middle class form of slow death. We exist in a constant state of competition and failure. We are positioned in a struggle to resist being worn out daily.

MATRIZes: Is this the reason you do your research?
Skeggs: Maybe.

MATRIZes: To make it possible for people to think about it?
Skeggs: Or even more selfishly, for me to think about what is going on... When the financial crash happened I realised I had to start teaching about economics and financialisation again. I realized that no one really understands financialisation. So, on the one hand we need to learn to be able to teach, but we also need to understand things. So I think I'm possibly quite selfish in this way. Because I want to understand this brutal world. When I become angry and outraged, then I go out and learn and teach. I go out and talk. I think that my imagination is about learning and understanding and then communicating. And staying angry is helpful. We have to have anger to stop the fatigue. We need to stand out, to have something to fight for. I have plenty to fight for on so many fronts. M

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