Rethinking the rabble: Social investment states and the geographies of poverty management

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Abstract:  
The management of poverty is undergoing significant changes with the rise of social investment states. Prospering amid the current drive for ‘inclusive’ neoliberalism, contemporary social investment states meld human capital development and labour market attachment with fiscal conservatism. As a rationality of government, social investment involves the state making and/or facilitating return-seeking ‘investments’ in people who are in poverty or at risk of being in poverty. Geographers have been central contributors to the transdisciplinary literature on poverty management, demonstrating how ambivalent combinations of caring (sustenance), curing (therapy), and controlling (discipline) interventions are brought to bear on poor populations in various sites and at various scales. Yet, geographers and other social scientists have not explicitly examined the relationship between social investment rationality and the changing nature of poverty management. In this presentation, I show how governmental awareness and concern about the long-term public cost of poverty—incurred within health systems, in particular—has begun to modulate the selection and sequencing of interventions that seek to manage poverty. I argue that, through state-orchestrated projects of social investment, poverty management is being reconceptualized and reconfigured from present-focused ‘rabble management’ to future-focused ‘investment management’. Such changes make it essential for geographers to rethink where, when and how poverty management occurs. I begin this task by sketching a critical-geographical research agenda related to the objectification, economization, and subjectification of the ‘investable poor’.

Bio: Dr. Tom Baker is a lecturer/assistant professor in human geography at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research focuses on the production, implementation and mobilization of social policies addressing disadvantaged populations. He is currently studying the international growth of Social Impact Bonds, a privately-financed model of health/social service provision.