

## **Class and culture: sources of confusion in educational sociology**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reiterates the centrality of economics (relations of production) in Marxist models of class, while avoiding the crude determinism which results from a neglect of cultural aspects of class formation. It explores the confusion in education and educational sociology arising from non-Marxist conceptions of class which place an exaggerated emphasis on cultural difference and see it as the determining factor. The paper explores some of the implications of non-Marxist models, including Bourdieu, for educational theory and practice. Critique is directed at the designation of different groups of workers as separate and mutually antagonistic ‘working’ and ‘middle’ classes and the deficit construction of workers thrust into poverty as an ‘underclass’ which is reproduced not by economic forces but by cultural habitus.

**Keywords** class, culture, middle class, underclass, working class, Marx, Bourdieu

*Socialist men and women have not fought and sometimes died over the centuries simply to bring an end to snobbery. (Terry Eagleton 2011:160)*

### **Introduction**

There is a widespread confusion surrounding the concept of class, in its vernacular use but also in academic fields where greater clarity might be expected. Much of this was stirred up by what is called the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences, though its roots are deeper, both conceptually and materially. In educational sociology the (frequently tacit) reliance on non-Marxist concepts of class, including conflation with Weber’s rather different concept of *Stand* (social status) creates enormous confusion but is seldom challenged or discussed.

It was a recent intervention by Deborah Kelsh (opening chapter *Cultureclass* in Kelsh et al. eds. 2010) which initially prompted this article. Kelsh has coined the term *cultureclass* to signify a tendency to view class as a free-floating cultural phenomenon relating to lifestyle, status and self-consciousness. As she explains, the

Marxist grounding of class theory in relations of exploitation – capitalism’s extraction of profit from the labour power of workers – is widely neglected in the sociology of education. The binary opposition between capitalist and worker which for Marxists is the primary generator of historic change is occluded by explanations which invert the causal links between economics and culture, and which regard cultural distinctions as the primary cause of class divisions.

There is, moreover, a second part to her argument which is equally crucial. This concerns the primacy given to the binary of ‘middle class’ / ‘working class’, in educational theory as in sociology more generally. Kelsh traces many of the problems of educational theory to a Weberian analysis which pluralizes social divisions and lacks a sense of inter-class conflict as a key driver of historical change. By privileging this binary (working / middle) over the struggle between capitalism and workers, sociologists effectively disconnect struggles within the field of education from wider historic developments. Furthermore, the hegemonic versions of educational sociology, by erasing the exploitative relations of production from the theoretical imaginary, make it difficult to situate educational events within a wider struggle, let alone conceive of the possibility of life beyond capitalism.

Kelsh’s argument is a telling intervention and puts a finger on so many problems of sociological theory. At the same time, however, we also need to recognize that a dogmatic exclusion of culture from class theory is itself fundamentally un-Marxist (though that is clearly not Kelsh’s intention). This article therefore looks both ways, and hopefully to extend and clarify the argument rather than to muddle and compromise. This is not to write off texts and authors whose class understanding is problematic, but to argue that a critique of their class theory is essential if we are to deploy their other ideas well. In other words, even sociological studies which are underpinned by a flawed class analysis can provide valuable insights if re-orientated around a Marxist class theory.

It is important to recognise the significance of the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences, which

has involved not simply a (re-)emphasis on the significance of culture, but also a turning away from economic or structural explanations and analysis. (Crompton 2008: 44)

However the ideological displacement of economic oppression by moral and cultural explanations is not new. Blaming poverty on fecklessness and promiscuity has been a trope of explanations of social division and suffering since Victorian times. When the British Prime Minister sounded off about the ‘moral’ causes of the August 2011 riots, he drew readily on discourses which trace back to the Nineteenth Century. Cameron, the millionaire head of a government packed with millionaires, denounced the rioters for their ‘greed’ and their expectation of ‘reward without effort’. (Presumably this didn’t mean the fortune he himself had inherited.)

It is only to be expected that such voices on the political Right evade economic and political explanations by such moralising. What is more troubling is the extent to which culture displaces economics among left-leaning academic sociologists whose work, in fact, consistently foregrounds social justice. Kelsh’s term *cultureclass* is a valuable challenge and worthy of discussion.

To demonstrate the nature of current confusion, I will cite briefly a few writers whose work I admire and who provide enormous insight whilst being repeatedly deflected into the discourses of *cultureclass*. Central to any analysis, because of the extent of his influence, is Bourdieu who defines class in terms of its ‘being-perceived’ and ‘by its consumption as much as by its position in the relations of production’, though he sometimes concedes that ‘the latter governs the former’ (Bourdieu: 1984a: 484).

Diane Reay, in an article whose explicit aim ‘is to reclaim social class as a central concern within education’, nevertheless focuses on the binary of ‘working-class’ / ‘middle-class’ differences and respective dis/advantages. These differences in educational experience and outcomes are certainly important, but nowhere is there an attempt to define what makes a class, whether working, middle or the (ever absent) super-rich. This leads to the rather flawed conclusion:

We still have an education system in which working-class education is made to serve middle-class interests. (Reay 2006:294)

Capitalism is absent in this account, as are the children of capitalists who go elsewhere for their education.

The disappearance of the capitalist class is nothing new in educational sociology. Sally Power and Geoff Whitty (2006:447) cite Holly (1974:107):

A class system which has a bottom and a middle but no top makes nonsense. How strange that we hear so much of the 'working' class and 'middle' class while we hear almost nothing about any 'upper' class.

Nevertheless, their chapter gets no further than Wright's (1982) 'contradictory class locations' in explaining what the 'middle class' might be. Their subsequent work (Power et al. 2003:2) leaves matters unresolved, before settling pragmatically, as a basis for their empirical research, on 'those middle-class occupations most closely tied to education credentials'. In this account, the criteria for class position is not relations to capitalism production, but cultural activity as a gatekeeper of specific careers.

The confusion which discursively permeates educational sociology is highlighted by Andrew Sayer, who stresses the importance of keeping concepts of class well rooted in the economics of capitalist production:

In emphasising that some of the key mechanisms that generate inequalities in holdings of economic capital are indifferent to identities, I am countering a kind of vulgar culturalism or culturalist imperialism which assumes ascriptive, cultural definitions 'go all the way down', so that, for example, poverty is ultimately a product of a culture of poverty... People are not simply members of this or that class because of how others define their class and behave towards them, though these do have some effects. (Sayer 2005:93)

Class is not ultimately a matter of style. Indeed, the recent casualization of ruling class taste can work to conceal the deep divisions:

Marxism has not been put out of business because Etonians have started to drop their aitches... There is a telling contrast between the dressed-down matiness of the modern office and a global system in which distinctions of wealth and power yawn wider than ever... While the chief executive smooths his jeans over his sneakers, over one billion on the planet go hungry every day. (Eagleton 2011:162)

### **Production, culture and struggle: the shifting meanings of class**

To limit class to the economic sphere, however, seriously misconstrues and limits the Marxist tradition: culture is essential to Marxism given its focus on the dynamics of class development and action.

There is, in fact, a strong tradition in British Marxism which emphasises that culture is not some kind of add-on to the economic. This derived from the divorce of the New Left from the mechanistic materialism of Stalinist / Third International Communist Parties in the mid 1950s.

Just as capitalism is not always tied to heavy work, it is pertinent to consider that cultural does not stand in binary opposition to economic, for a variety of reasons:

- culture is itself generally material – tools, houses, pottery, TV shows and dancing;
- markets are themselves a social construct and exchange, employment and ownership can only take place if we share a basic understanding of the terms of such social relations;
- cultural work and consumption now form a significant portion of the economy;
- capitalist production processes and relations are a central constituent of our way of life.

In one sense, culture does go ‘all the way down’. The origins of the word lie in agricultural labour (Williams 1976), and in its modern anthropological sense of a way of life, it is thoroughly material as well as spiritual. A good working definition would be ‘matter with meaning’ or ‘activity which signifies’, though we should also include common beliefs (actually rarely divorced from practices): as Eagleton (2000:1) argues, ‘In Marxist parlance, it [culture] brings together both base and superstructure in a single word.’

This more dynamic relationship between economic and cultural is closer to Marx and Engels’ position than mechanistic assumptions about the economic somehow preceding the cultural. It enables us to relate the two, and indeed to examine how the economic conditions and shapes the cultural, without collapsing into the Stalinist fantasy of changing technologies (*means* of production) leading automatically to a transformation of *relations* of production.

Marx and Engels were consistent about the economic roots of class, but their driving interest lay in understanding the course of history and engaging in class struggle to create a better society and way of living. We need look no further than the start of the Communist Manifesto:

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (Marx and Engels 1996[1848]: 3)

In broad brush terms and (from the standpoint of his own times) outlining a future as much as evaluating a past, this pamphlet tells how the proletarians develop through struggle from ‘an incoherent mass’ to a great historical force; the authors speak of ‘*The organization of the proletarians into a class*’.

This has itself been understood in rather a simplistic way, as if the economic processes which produce classes somehow predate a stage of struggle. In particular, it has become a commonplace to explain that Marx distinguishes a class ‘in itself’ from a class ‘for itself’, in which the former signifies a purely economic entity. According to Andrew (1983), this Hegelian binary does not explicitly occur in Marx’s own writings but derives from a flawed misreading of just two or three source texts by subsequent commentators. It is helpful to focus on these as descriptions of a process of class development, which illustrate Marx’s struggle to portray the complex dynamics of this process of class formation. The various quotations which follow are not intended as an attempt to assert a dogma based on quotation of sacred texts, but to illustrate the imbrication of culture in the process of class formation.

In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, we find the following:

Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus already a class as against capital, but not yet for itself. In the struggle... this mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a political struggle. (Marx and Engels 1976, vol 6:211)

The phrase ‘class in itself’ does not appear here. Marx speaks first of all of the production of a ‘mass’ of workers. The concentration of capital concentrates them into a class face to face with capital (the original French *vis-à-vis* and the German *gegenüber* suggest facing or opposite, without the necessary implication of political opposition). This positioning with regards to capital gives them common interests but not yet a clear political vision, which must be formed in the course of struggle.

In *The German Ideology*, we read:

The separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitor. (Marx and Engels, 1976, vol 5:77)

Clearly, in this perspective, something more than capitalist relations of employment are needed to constitute a *class*.

In another much quoted passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx writes of the mid-nineteenth century French peasantry:

In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisations among them, they do not form a class. (Marx and Engels, 1976, vol 11:187)

Marx counterposes class in two senses here, but in neither case deploys the Hegelian binary ‘in / for itself’. Nor are the economic conditions of existence abstracted from the ‘mode of life’, ‘interests’ and ‘culture’, even at the less developed stage. The main emphasis is on a growth of solidarity, consciousness, and capacity to struggle.

It is important, then, to hold onto the constitutive importance of capitalist ‘relations of production’ but without imagining that the economic relation pre-exists or is cut off from the cultural activity: culture is there from the beginning. Indeed, a purely economic constitution of class would be unimaginable in reality – workers without skills or songs, location or language, tastes or traditions. It suggests, moreover, a Cartesian matter-mind dualism which is alien to Marx and Marxism.

In these various texts Marx and Engels are describing a process of class formation and development which is grounded in the economic relation between the owners of capital and those with only their labour power to sell, but which moves through a complex and inevitably cultural process involving association, conditions of everyday life, attitudes, understanding, struggle and liberation. The outcome is not pre-determined: for Marx and Engels class struggle has historically resulted:

Either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx and Engels 1996[1848]: 3)

For Rosa Luxemburg, at the time of the First World War, the historic choice was ‘Socialism or Barbarism’. In the protracted process of class development, there is struggle in its many forms, with culture and ideology imbricated from start to finish. It follows that we have to pay close attention to the complex ways in which relations of production feed into and connect with ideological transformation and social change.

Sociologists have used various categorisations to explain the complexity of this process. Skeggs asks:

For instance, do we mean class structure, identity, consciousness, action, and so on when we speak of class? (Skeggs 1997:6)

Thrift and Williams (1987:5) distinguish five major aspects of class analysis: ‘class structure, the formation of classes, class conflict, class capacity and class consciousness’. Mann (1973:13) argues that class-consciousness can be distinguished into class identity, class opposition, class totality and conceptions of an alternative society; thus workers can be conscious of themselves as a class but fatalistic about the potential for change. Crompton (2008:15) makes a general distinction between ways of reading class as:

- prestige, status, culture or ‘lifestyles’
- structured social and economic inequality
- actual or potential social and political actors.

Ball (2003:9) develops this model concerning the exercise of class advantage in education:

- economic context / state of class relations
- structure
- dispositions
- aspirations, responsibility and anxiety
- practices
- choice, distinction and closure.

Each level or aspect is capable of further qualitative distinctions. Class *struggle* can be envisaged in terms of striking for immediate benefit or as part of a broader social struggle for socialism, or the two may be entangled. Workers can be *conscious* of themselves as a class at a more or less instinctive level, at the common sense level of ‘Them and Us’ or in more politically aware terms. As well as class *consciousness*, Bourdieu argues that people’s conditions of life and social situation can generate a more instinctive and embodied ‘class *unconsciousness*’ in terms of a habitus or set of attitudes, dispositions and behaviours (1977:78seq).

Under Marxist definitions, class divisions are grounded in relations of production, but the movement between various aspects or manifestations of class are not a once-and-for-all unidirectional or smooth shift from class structure to class consciousness to class action (a simplification which has been called the S-C-A model, Pahl 1989). These are not three historic stages, nor separable steps in an individual’s development.

As E P Thompson demonstrates, whilst insisting on the primacy of economic relations of production, the ‘making’ of the English working class did not involve a ready-made economic class entity which then began to struggle. In his classic formulation, the working class was ‘present at its own making’ (Thompson 1968:9). Thompson’s position aligns with that of Marx and Engels when they write of the ‘organisation of the proletarians *into* a class’. Thompson argues that struggle is there at every stage, in a complex process involving the development of a class consciousness.

The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not. We can see a logic in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predicate any law.

Consciousness of class arises in the same way in different times and places, but never in just the same way. (Thompson 1968:10)

Nor is class formation ever finished.

Classes must be seen, not as veritable geological formations once they have acquired their original shape, but as phenomena in a constant process of formation, reproduction, re-formation and de-formation. (Therborn 1983:39)

The case of Britain is exemplary: the Thatcher government brought about a significant restructuring of the class structure, including the virtual destruction of heavy industry and much of its unionized workforce, the shift of many manual workers into self-employment (a petit bourgeois rather than working class status), the marginalization of large numbers of industrial workers into chronic unemployment or insecure low-paid work (the so-called ‘underclass’) and the proletarianisation of public sector professionals such as teachers through forms of surveillance and management imported from the private sector.

In view of the complexity of meanings attached to the word, Wright (2005:180) has suggested that it would avoid a great deal of trouble if theorists explained what kind of *question* they were using ‘class’ to answer. I would also argue, though, that diverse uses need to be reconcilable. For example, if one’s main concern is with the gap in educational performance between manual and white-collar workers’ children, it helps to be precise and not to speak of a struggle for power between the ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’. Though there is clearly a struggle for educational credentials within the context of marketised ‘parental choice’ systems of schooling, it is erroneous and damaging to construe this as a struggle between two *classes*.

### **Cultureclass and the myth of a ‘classless society’**

The loss of economic perspective in academic sociology already provided an opening, in the 1950s, for politicians and the media to construct the notion of the disappearance of the working class and the gradual emergence of a classless society. This was based on culturalised notions of class grounded both in patterns of consumption - ‘lifestyle’ differences – and a changing balance of occupational types in developed economies. Both explanations crucially miss Marx’s grasp of class in terms of exploitative relations of production which are a driver of history.

The supposed disintegration and disappearance of the working class was already under discussion in the 1950s. Indeed, this was a common explanation for the defeat of Labour in the 1959 British general election:

The most popular formula was that the defeat was inevitable because Labour is identified with the proletariat and the proletariat is breaking up. This is extremely doubtful. It is true, of course, that modern houses, modern furniture, television sets and washing-machines and, in some cases, cars, are increasingly available to many

wage-earners. But what is meant by calling this process ‘deproletarianization’, as the *Economist* has done? (Williams 1965: 355)

Westergaard and Resler, in their classic study *Class in a Capitalist Society* (1975), point out that a small improvement in workers’ living standards, as well as a marginal reduction in income differentials, was already leading social commentators in the 1950s and early 1960s to suggest we were moving into a period of ‘post-capitalism’ (ibid: 31). They demonstrate how unfounded this was by calculating income inequality at the end of the 1950s: the richest 1 percent of the population were receiving, after tax, as much income as the poorest 30 percent.

However, the declarations of the end of class reached a peak among right-wing neoliberal apologists and (often formerly left-wing) postmodernists precisely in the period when capitalism’s attack on workers’ living standards was becoming most acute. In David Harvey’s words:

Progressives of all stripes seem to have caved in to neoliberal thinking since it is one of the primary fictions of neoliberalism that class is a fictional category that exists only in the imagination of socialists and crypto-communists. (Harvey 2005:202; see also Harvey 1993)

Skeggs makes a similar point about the neglect of class by many feminist academics:

It may not be recognized as a problem for those who have the privilege to ignore it. (Skeggs 1997:6)

Although the concentration of workers into factories created important conditions for class action, much confusion arises from the spurious equation of capitalist exploitation with heavy industry. As Eagleton reminds us:

In Marx’s own time, the largest group of wage labourers was not the industrial working class but domestic servants, most of whom were female. The working class, then, is not always male, brawny and handy with a sledgehammer...

Marx himself did not consider that you had to engage in manual labour to count as working class. In *Capital*, for example, he ranks commercial workers on the same level as industrial ones. (Eagleton 2011: 169-171)

The intensity of work and the oppressive nature of work discipline in call centres is arguably worse than on the car factory production line, because at least in the car plant you can have your mind on something else.

Many economic and cultural changes have occurred in the transition from industrial to 'late' or 'postmodern' capitalism, but the essential nature of capitalist relations of production remains. This does not depend on the heaviness of the product or production process. Nor is the argument diminished by the postmodern emphasis on 'surface'; capitalism extracted profits from workers who painted flowers on crockery in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and equally exploits those who produce images on computer screens in the 21<sup>st</sup>. Capitalism is promiscuous in the ways it can extract profit – in the production of solid objects, surfaces, energy or ideas. Drucker (1994:64) makes a rather basic category error when he concludes that knowledge has replaced both labour and capital and that the 'knowledge society' is 'post-capitalist'.

Though the myth of 'classlessness' is no longer strong in educational sociology, its logic is often sustained in discussions about globalization, the risk society, educational choice, the knowledge society, and so on, which make only marginal reference to class divisions, as well as in many of the assumptions about 'middle class' (see below). It has also become normal, unlike the 1960s-80s, for educational theorists to discuss curriculum and pedagogy without mentioning class.

The slipperiness of the 'class' concept is evident in many claims that class is an archaic concept, and many theorists have misread changing work patterns and the (temporary) elimination of absolute poverty in developed countries as the end of capitalist relations per se. The lack of clarity on relations of production as the bedrock of class is evident throughout.

### **Bourdieu, 'cultural capital' and habitus**

Given his extensive influence on recent sociology of education, it is pertinent to consider the class analysis underpinning the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Much of his work can be summed up as an attempt to move beyond what he sees as the 'one-dimensional' nature of Marxism's emphasis on the economic by looking at how it connects with other aspects of our life or 'cultural' activity. A major interest is exploring how power and advantage are exercised through various other kinds of assets beyond economic ones; his explanation is in terms of various other 'capitals' such as cultural, social, linguistic, educational and symbolic.

His concept of ‘cultural capital’ has been particularly influential in explaining some of the ways in which the education system reproduces class divisions. Basically, the concept is that elites can turn the institutional and public recognition of their cultural interests into an economic asset. Thus, to give a crude example, compared with a pupil who plays bass guitar, a pupil who is learning the cello might well be regarded by teachers as more intelligent, placed in higher ability groups, and ultimately proceed to better paid employment.

Unfortunately Bourdieu seems to put the power of economic and cultural capitals in contemporary society on a par with each other. We see this at its most graphic in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984a:128), including diagrams in which the vertical axis represents power and superiority (the highest-ranking groups appearing at the top) and the horizontal axis represents (on one side) those with a greater amount of economic capital and (on the other) those with more cultural capital. Bourdieu’s explanation is that individuals owe their position within social space to an aggregate of economic and cultural capital; some members of the ruling class are there because of the wealth they deploy in the production process, and others because of cultural assets including education and qualifications. Bourdieu claims to locate occupational groups on the vertical axis by calculating the total of their capitals, though it is unclear what ‘quantity’ of cultural capital might equate with £500,000 of economic capital, for example.

Various objections can be raised against Bourdieu’s model:

- 1) Although capitalists might rely for their legitimacy on lawyers, musicians, professors and newspaper editors, these cultural legitimators would not survive without the processes of material production and the power of the capitalist class.
- 2) The production and circulation of dominant ideologies operates within the broad constraints of capitalism, whereas the reverse does not hold true.
- 3) The owners of ‘economic capital’ invariably buy education for their children to ensure that they also acquire ‘cultural capital’. Similarly, it is more difficult to acquire the highest level of educational qualifications, to enter the highest status professions, etc. without a certain amount of economic capital. Money is crucial in both cases.

- 4) Those located at the bottom of the social scale are there because they possess neither 'economic capital' nor 'cultural capital'; they don't divide into two fractions.
- 5) Many individuals with very high levels of cultural capital – poets and pianists for example – have minimal power over the rest of the population and certainly do not exploit them. The same cannot be said of the top 100 chief executives.

Bourdieu uses 'capital' in a different sense than Marx, to mean simply property, income or sometimes even expenditure, and his alignment of individuals and occupations on the vertical axis is essentially about social standing. Distinction is a highly sophisticated discussion of the relationships between taste or lifestyle and social standing, circling around issues outlined by Weber: 'Status honour is normally expressed by the fact that above all else a specific style of life can be expected from those who wish to belong to the circle' (cited Weininger 2002:121). This is fundamentally different from the Marxist conception of class.

Bourdieu's division of the population into classes is messy, to say the least. He speaks broadly of three classes which include various 'fractions'. His 'dominant' or 'upper' classes include secondary school teachers alongside industrial and commercial employers; his 'middle classes' include primary teachers and technicians alongside craftsmen and small shopkeepers. (1984a:526). Within 'middle classes' he includes a fraction which he oddly calls the 'new petite bourgeoisie', an eclectic mix of 'junior commercial executives, the medical and social services, secretaries, and the various cultural intermediaries' (1984a:14); indeed one of his illustrations of the tastes and attitudes of a member of this group is the case study of a nurse living on a shoe-string with her daughter in a two-room flat. In the original French, he uses the term 'petit bourgeois' which misleadingly suggests that white-collar and professional employees are like small shopkeepers and self-employed tradesmen.

The metaphor of multiple capitals beyond the economic has brought important insights into the complexities of how power is exercised, by focusing on the concept of assets which facilitate different kinds of productive activity and bring returns, but we should beware of reading too close an equivalence between them. In some texts, Bourdieu asserts that these other capitals are indeed subordinate to the economic:

The economic field tends to impose its structure on other fields. (Bourdieu 1984b: 230)

In reality, the social space is a multi-dimensional space, an open set of relatively autonomous fields, fields which are more or less strongly and directly subordinate, in their functioning and their transformation, to the field of economic production. (ibid: 245)

On this basis, then, it becomes possible for Marxists to draw selectively and critically on Bourdieu's extensive explorations of social power. His concept of *habitus*, for example, focuses our attention on the ways in which social positions can lead to unconscious attitudes and behaviours which leave unjust social relationships unchallenged. This is clearly one of the ways in which the power structure of capitalism is maintained or reproduced, and pertinent to a discussion of educational aspirations:

Closer to a class unconscious than to a 'class consciousness' in the Marxist sense, the sense of the position one occupies in the social space (what Goffman calls the 'sense of one's place') is the practical mastery of the social structure as a whole... They incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than to rebel against it... The sense of one's place, as the sense of what one can or cannot 'allow oneself', implies a tacit acceptance of one's position, a sense of limits ('that's not meant for us'). (1984b:235)

An overemphasis on the unconscious nature of *habitus* can, however, lead to a new fatalism:

As many commentators have observed, his emphasis on the adaptation of the habitus to actors' circumstances exaggerates actors' compliance with their position. (Sayer 2005:23)

Modifying this notion of habitus so as to open up possibilities of liberation and resistance, Sayer (ibid: 22-51) argues that we can block or override the dispositions we have been socialized into, that our habitus can be modified, that tensions can arise because we find ourselves pulled in different directions, that we have internal conversations, become conscious, that we listen to other people's arguments and ideas, that we consider the ethics of forms of action, feel our own pain and that of others. He points out that Bourdieu's later research is inconceivable if we believe that human beings are simple 'habitus' conforming to 'habitat' (Sayer 2005:30seq).

It is evident from the interview transcripts presented in Bourdieu et al's *The Weight of the World* that some actors churn through their moral narratives in their internal conversations almost obsessively (Bourdieu et al., 1999). (Sayer 2005:29)

Some of the younger interviewees...seem to have resisted their first habitat from the start. (ibid:34)

Again, this is an important perspective of agency when seeking to understand how young people dis/engage with schooling or make educational choices, and to help some to find a space in which they can succeed 'against the odds'.

### **What is the 'middle class'?**

In the Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels argue that class structure is simplifying into an opposition between capitalists and workers, placing pressure on other groups:

It [the bourgeoisie] has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers. (1996[1848]:8)

More prosaically:

The lower strata of the middle class – the small tradespeople, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants – all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the large capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. (ibid: 13)

As we have seen above, the improving living standards of manual workers in the 1950s and 60s, and subsequently the increasing proportion of white-collar and professional employees in a 'knowledge economy', led some to speak of the death, or embourgeoisement, of the working-class. As the number of white collar jobs and particularly managerial and professional ones increased, contrary to Marx's prediction it was proposed that the middle class was actually growing.

Westergaard and Resler (1975) provide a pointed analysis of how this confusion arises from using occupational position as the criterion:

'Middle class' is often used as an umbrella term of startling elasticity to describe all sections of the population who are not manual workers: from routine grade office labour, increasingly indistinguishable in market position from manual workers, to the

very top... In many instances, 'middle class' covers the whole span beyond 'working class' (itself usually conceived as embracing only the mass of manual workers): nonsensically 'middle' between a lower group and a vacuum. The terminology is conservative by implication: partly because the word 'middle' suggests a structure of inequality in which status is the predominant basis of distinction; but above all because the notion entailed of a vacuum above the 'middle' implicitly denies any significant concentration of privilege at the top.

Thus the common language of class covers up the most central feature of class. For it is, as we shall try to show, the concentration of power and property in a very small section of the population on which the whole ramified structure of class inequality turns. For all that late twentieth-century capitalist societies like ours are complex in their detail, they are very simple in that essential respect. (Westergaard and Resler 1975: 29)

In France the preferred term was 'petite bourgeoisie', with Poulantzos, among others, inventing the concept of a 'new petit bourgeoisie' to apply to the rapidly growing number of white-collar and professional employees (see Adams and Sydie 2002:100). Although Poulantzos is careful to call them a 'group' rather than a 'class', the terminology is entirely misleading. There is a fundamental error in classifying white-collar employees, whether working in the private or public sector, as 'petit bourgeois', and therefore merging them with independent shopkeepers or self-employed plumbers. In English-speaking countries, this translated as 'new middle class', and was equally misleading though less obvious.

The difficulties with this model emerge as soon as one begins to ask where this 'middle class' fit in terms of Marx's class model. Stephen Ball's fine book on education and the 'middle class' (2003) manages to avoid this question until the appendix, where they are defined as a 'service class' which is actually a 'class of employees'. So far, his summary coincides with a marxist model. However he then describes them as more advantaged than other workers because they have 'pension rights, increments, employment rights and career opportunities' and 'some degree of professional autonomy', but adds that both kinds of relative advantage are under threat (ibid:181). Beyond this, his sample all had some form of higher education and were home-owners. This seems a tenuous basis on which to establish them objectively as a separate 'class'. After all, many manual workers have to exercise a degree of autonomy at work; most public sector manual workers pay into pension schemes as

many private sector manual workers did until some employers notoriously looted the funds; and home ownership is scarcely a 'middle class' preserve, particularly in the recent context of sub-prime mortgages and a lack of public housing. (See also Power et al. 2003:2 for other evidence of the fragility of this concept.)

The considerable emphasis that has been placed on educational ambition as a 'middle class' way of securing advantage over working class children not only overlooks the aspirations of many manual-worker parents to ensure their children enjoy a better life, but also neglects what Barbara Ehrenreich (1989) refers to as a 'fear of falling' on the part of 'middle class' parents. This perspective is indeed highlighted by Ball (2006), where the riskiness of school choice, the uncertainty of the knowledge available even to those with greater cultural and social capital, the high level of anxiety, a clinging to traditionalist curricula and disciplinary regimes which they believe lead to academic success, emerge strongly. Ball relates this to the notion of a risk-society:

The extent of parents' ethical and social responsibility today... is historically unprecedented... The contemporary family is under a pressure to educate. (Beck-Gernsheim, 1996:143)

But significantly capitalism and the ruling class are absent from this argument, or at best remain implicit. Instead of analysing the way in which neoliberal capitalism is reshaping education through accountability regimes and education markets, there is a displacement of blame from capitalism onto a 'middle class' who are castigated for their role in the game of school choice.

It is more appropriate and helpful to frame the cultural desires of the so-called 'middle class' in terms of the pressures felt by these better educated employees to protect their children's future. It is not a struggle for resources at the expense of the less well educated, nor, in most cases, a matter of avarice or unbridled ambition for their offspring (though this is also common!). We need to understand the phenomenon in terms of the different responses sought and possible, within a 'high stakes' accountability system of schooling designed to serve the national economy; relatively successful 'middle class' children may enjoy opportunities unavailable to others but they are victims too as education becomes more pressured, instrumental and alienating.

The notion of 'greater autonomy' in middle-class jobs is a dubious boundary marker separating 'middle' from working class within a capitalist economy:

The shift from bureaucratic to flexible paradigms of organizational efficiency (Atkinson 1985) does not necessarily mean that workers are being given greater opportunities to use their initiative and creative skills. The primary concern of employers is rarely the release of the creative energies of the workforce but how to maintain managerial control in flatter, leaner, and more flexible organizations. The inculcation of corporate mission statements, teamwork techniques, and staff appraisal schemes tied to remuneration are all ways of controlling the workforce (Rose 1999).

The power shift in the direction of knowledge workers has been greatly exaggerated. Most 'knowledge' workers are only able to capitalize on their knowledge within employment... While employees are free to change employers, they are not free from the need to make a living in a wage economy. (Brown 2006: 388)

We cannot make much progress in understanding the current changes in education, or the 'knowledge economy' discourse, without understanding the centrality of labour-power to profit-making (see Allman et al 2000). For Marx, labour power – the deployment of workers' time and skills and willingness to work – is purchased by capitalists just like any other commodity, but the peculiar features of this commodity is its capacity to produce more than it costs to buy – hence 'surplus value'. The average value of workers under capitalism relates to the (input) cost of maintaining and reproducing them but this says nothing about the (output) value of what they can produce. One very large group of the so-called 'middle class' are employed, within capitalism, to maintain (e.g. nurses) or reproduce (e.g. teachers) this special commodity of labour-power (ibid: 11). Thus, rather than being a different class, teachers and nurses are both part of the greater working class or proletariat, in Marx's sense, and help to re/produce it.

This clearly creates conflict, as they also see themselves as caring for and forming human beings. Indeed, it is arguable that they could not do their job effectively for capitalism if they did not see and carry out their work in terms of such inter-human caring and formation. For teachers, the power to shape a new generation of workers involves ethical dilemmas and demands, in class terms as well as those of a shared humanity. It inevitably raises questions of how education can be something more and

other than the production of labour power or human resources. This contradiction is, indeed, at the heart of the long historical struggle for education reform.

For capitalism – and this is something which neoliberal policy strives to intensify – education is about increasing surplus value by gearing learning more exclusively to the needs of capitalist production. Of course, managers and supervisors also operate to intensify the extraction of surplus value from labour-power, through a combination of organizational, motivational and (in a limited sense) educational activity. Not all are well paid or indeed have a high degree of autonomy in how to organize the workplace or carry out their work. However, though largely contracted in the same way as other workers, it is almost impossible for them to become part of a working class in struggle. Nor is there the same kind of tension in their role as for medical and education workers. At the same time, it is difficult for them, by themselves, to form a separate ‘middle class’ in any political sense.

This does not diminish the value of Ball, Reay, Power, Whitty and others in studying how parents in professional occupations are better able to ensure their children’s educational success through deploying ‘social’ and ‘cultural capital’, but it does question the validity of narrating them as a separate *class* engaged in a struggle against a ‘working class’ of manual and routine white-collar workers.

The development and practice of middle class-ness increasingly appears as a cultural project and discursive construction without a viable economic foundation; as soon as we ask how particular groups of employees relate to capitalism, we begin to see the recent strikes against public service cuts and the loss of pension rights by British civil servants and teachers not as the result of middle class selfishness but the valid resistance of a section of the proletariat, in Marx’s sense.

This is not to suggest that all white-collar professionals form part of the working class; there clearly exist newspaper editors who go horse-riding with prime ministers; doctors who become owners of old people’s homes; and high-ranking civil servants who float through revolving doors to be executives of private-sector companies with lucrative government contracts. But these elite individuals, however powerful and well connected, scarcely constitute a class with interests separate from capitalists, and as they move upwards in wealth and status, possibilities are opened for them to acquire substantial shares and executive status, transforming into capitalists. To the

extent that they have a coherent identity, they can no more aspire to a separate destiny than the priestly caste of pre-capitalist societies. They should on no account be confused with the third of the population which Stephen Ball (2003:5) loosely classifies as a middle class, nor is it helpful when academic papers fail to make it clear whether the interviewees quoted are top civil servants or low-paid staff in the local benefits office.

### **‘Chavs’: the politics of class contempt**

While educational sociology displaces and castigates one large group of workers as a ‘privileged middle class’, politicians, the media and a shadier kind of academic cast another large section into hell as the so-called Underclass. There is a particular venom in the way those pauperized by de-industrialisation have been blamed for their own suffering. Those struggling to survive in regions where there is no work to be had are blamed for a ‘lack of aspirations’ and a ‘culture of poverty’. Though poverty clearly does have cultural manifestations, it only suits the rich to turn the relationship upside down and see culture as cause not effect.

This is clearly a crucial issue for educators and educational sociologists who struggle to explain the poor educational outcomes of the majority of young people growing up in poverty, including the tendency for the attainment gap to grow even larger during their teenage years.

In 1989, after years of Thatcherism, the Sunday Times invited Charles Murray, who had popularized the ‘underclass’ concept in the United States, to visit two of Britain’s poorest council estates. Predictably, he pointed to ‘drugs, crime, illegitimacy, drop out from the job market, drop out from school, casual violence’ (Murray 1990-2-3) as the cause of poverty. This found its way into Blairite discourse in more hybrid forms (Levitas 2005) before enjoying a crescendo during David Cameron’s bid for power. Owen Jones’ book *Chavs: the demonization of the working class* describes dramatically and with carefully referenced evidence how an ideological class war accompanied the economic one.

With the help of Tory briefings, newspapers left their readers in no doubt as to what Cameron was getting at. ‘David Cameron tells the fat and the poor: take responsibility’, as the Times put it... (Jones 2011:74)

Cameron became prime minister accompanied by a chorus of media denigration against ‘benefit scroungers’, unmarried mothers, young men who were making ‘lifestyle’ decisions not to work, and naturally the riots of 2011 were blamed on bad parenting, absent fathers, criminality, idleness, immorality and greed.

The chav caricature is set to be at the heart of British politics in the years ahead. After the 2010 general election, a Conservative-led government dominated by millionaires took office with an aggressive programme of cuts, unparalleled since the early 1920s. The global economic crisis that began in 2007 may have been triggered by the greed and incompetence of a wealthy banking elite, yet it was working-class people who were – and are – expected to pay the price. But any attempt to shred the welfare state is fraught with political difficulties, and so the government swiftly resorted to blaming its users. (Jones 2011:11)

This is part of a longer process whereby:

Class is being increasingly defined as a moral cultural property of the person, related to their attitudes and practices (not named and known directly as class)... the shift from class as an economic categorization to one based on cultural practices. (Skeggs 2005:50)

The working class are positioned as stuck, with nothing to offer culturally except as an indication of the difference between the civilized and the uncivilized. Their difference is marked through cultural-moral value, through scrounging, being jobs and breeding too much. (ibid:57)

Robert MacDonald’s research focuses on the experience of young people in Teesside, previously a thriving centre of shipbuilding, steel and chemical industries. In 1974, 55 per cent of Teesside’s 16-year-olds left school for employment, but in 1994 only 4 per cent got jobs (MacDonald 1997: 21). As in the nineteenth century, those left behind are stigmatized as ‘irresponsible, welfare-draining’ single mothers and ‘feckless’ young men (p19). They are blamed for lack of effort and aspiration, yet according to official figures only one in three youth trainees find employment afterwards (p190). MacDonald’s painstaking research demonstrates that, rather than a separate underclass, they are predominantly workers alternating between poorly paid insecure work and unemployment (p188). His interviews with over 300 young people in this situation show that, despite Murray’s ‘culture of poverty’ thesis, they continue to want to work and to enjoy a stable family life.

Even so, economic hardship has a cultural effect which impacts on education. Simon Charlesworth's (2000) study of former coal and steel districts of South Yorkshire shows this clearly, as he interviews those left behind after their industries were destroyed. He demonstrates the impact of deindustrialization as a loss of collective identity and mutuality, a sense of shame and an enduring sense of futility as training schemes fail to lead to work. These are the cultural effects of enduring marginalization, and politically incapacitating, but to call them a 'culture of poverty' would deflect from the need for economic reorganisation to provide socially valuable work.

The difference this makes in terms of education is fundamental. At one extreme, Ruby Payne's notorious teacher development program in the USA emphasises gearing teaching to her moralistic and derogatory stereotype of 'the poor' – people who supposedly 'know how to get guns', raid supermarket garbage bins for outdated food, have common law marriages (as if others didn't?), view jail as an ordinary part of life, and live in disorganized, noisy and violent homes (Payne 2005, summary by Dudley-Marling 2007:3). On the other, we see teachers who struggle to counter the sense of shame and futility in young people, and school cultures which are actively constructed round recognition and respect, whether through the curriculum and pedagogy, school ethos or community links (Wrigley 2000; Wrigley et al. 2012).

### **Education, class and culture**

There is an enormous amount of culture in the workings of class, even within a Marxist perspective. Although the very fact of being forced to sell your labour power provides the starting point of your class status, this is no culture-free 'in itself' abstraction but a contract which is situated in time and space, and involves particular skills and attitudes which are the outcome of a particular cultural inheritance. From there to the point when a class become sufficiently 'for itself' to achieve revolutionary change – which again cannot be conceived except within a particular cultural as well as economic conjuncture – there is the complex and messy interweaving of class identification, disidentification and misidentification; consciousness and unconsciousness; habitus and reflection; lived experience on a day-to-day basis and through crises; collusion and resistance; struggles for short and long term goals; ethics and aesthetics; ideology and theory; structure and reproduction. To argue that these are thoroughly cultural is not to deny the centrality of economy and class relations.

Within the field of education, questions of ‘reproduction’ are certainly important; there is an extremely strong correlation between poverty and poor qualifications, and also significant relationship between qualification levels and whether your parents are manual or white-collar workers. This matters, not because of an attainment gap per se between manual workers’ and professionals’ children but because of the constraints this places on future lives. Underachievement is about large numbers of young people being denied the knowledge and intellectual capacity they need to understand, participate in and change their world.

This is why it is important to be clear about the dangers posed by England’s education minister Michael Gove. He is right to be concerned about schooling which does not challenge young people (including those growing up in poverty) to think. Perversely, his solution makes this even harder, since the overloaded curriculum he proposes, without any regard to the age or possible interests of children, can only lead to more rote learning, especially under the pressures of a draconian inspection regime. Gove’s proposed curriculum is designed to set schools up for failure and subsequent privatisation. It is not designed to enable them to think about the world they live in.

Critical educators cannot avoid thinking about curriculum partly in terms of class identity and recognition. In many school systems, a standardised curriculum has been imposed which leaves little space for such reflection. There is no point attempting to rebuild a school curriculum based on nostalgia (beer, bingo and brass bands?) Nevertheless, schools do need to create opportunities for their students to engage with their economic and cultural realities in critical but affirmative ways (Gonzalez et al. 2005; Thomson 2006; Zipin 2009).

School culture – ethos as well as curriculum – is also an important issue for socialists, and needs to be related to questions of class, in a Marxist sense. The insistence by government-approved experts over the past twenty years on tight discipline in inner-city schools overlooks how this can have a cumulative effect reinforcing the pervasive denigration and stigmatization which these families and young people suffer. When researching my first book *The Power to Learn* (Wrigley 2000), a study of thriving and successful inner-city schools, it became clear that *respect* rather than discipline was the keyword which explained the kind of relationships being fostered.

As Charlesworth (2000) and others show, the experience of long-term unemployment and insecure work in deindustrialized areas generates a psychological outlook of (i) shame, as people internalize their situation; (ii) futility, as they realize that plans simply do not reach fruition and further training does not bring them work. It is important to understand how these emotions are merely reinforced by traditionalist patterns of schooling. Firstly, children from poorer families are highly likely to be placed in 'low ability' groups, and consigned to tedious and unchallenging work. Secondly, the dominance of learning as alienated labour (see Wrigley 2006:105) whereby students simply follow instructions in producing something of no apparent benefit to anyone but which only brings the 'exchange value' rewards of marks and grades – this culture of learning is particularly un motivating for young people who are growing up in a climate of hopelessness. This is a neglected aspect of education's reproduction of class relations.

The struggle for dignity and respect which cultural sociologists such as Beverley Skeggs write about is also pertinent to the reproduction of class relationships by the school system. The regular and exhausting conflicts in schools in disadvantaged areas are saturated with young people's perceptions of disrespect and stigmatisation. Students quickly come to understand themselves as surplus in schools where exclusions are common; this directly connects with a society where (at the time of writing) more than a fifth of 18-25 year olds are neither in work nor education / training. Sennett and Cobb (1972), in their book *The hidden injuries of class*, point to the long-term damage brought about by the ways in which schooling works with ideas of children's fixed in-ability and un-intelligence. We need to look at the combination and reciprocity of economics (being surplus) and culture (feeling stigmatized) in order to understand the alternative attractions of rioting, teenage gangs, fascists or joining the army as potential sources of self esteem. This requires an educational sociology underpinned by Marxist class analysis, rather than a fixation on the false binary of 'working' versus 'middle' or the devastating mythology of an 'underclass'.

For those concerned with social justice in the field of education, class is a central issue, though for many years neglected in comparison to 'race' and gender. Even within the limited horizons of School Effectiveness researchers, and within the current policy dynamics linked to international testing, poverty has now become a major concern. However, poverty needs to be adequately located within a framework

of capital and labour. Poverty isn't accidental misfortune or relative disadvantage, but an endemic product of a system which employs people only so long as they produce profit, a system which seeks to maximize profit by cutting wages and reducing the size of the workforce, which shops around the globe for cheaper workers, and where people are made redundant while others desperately need their work and skills to house and feed and teach and care for them.

But class and capitalism also impact on the curriculum, teaching and learning. Education which is increasingly viewed instrumentally - in terms of its supply of human resources to the economy, in terms of brutal competition in a spurious meritocracy - damages even the supposedly 'privileged middle class'. As Freire constantly argued, education is either for liberation or for domestication (1972:124 and elsewhere). The reproduction of class by the education system goes beyond the distribution of qualifications and involves the acquisition and exercise of voice and agency. Marxists must attend to culture as well as economics, because their key interest is to transform society, not just analyse how it is divided.

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