

Education, Class and Culture: the Birmingham ethnographic tradition and the problem of the new middle class

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ABSTRACT *The ethnographies of youth culture and schooling produced by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and its followers had a major impact on educational sociology during the late 1970s and 1980s. Despite this invaluable contribution, important theoretical and methodological problems emerged in their treatment of class and culture. In particular, the untheorised presence of the 'new middle class' and a confusing notion of 'dominant culture', weakened the coherence of their analyses. This article traces these problems from the early studies of youth culture through to more recent school ethnographies. It concludes by stressing the relevance of critical concepts like class and culture within contemporary debates emerging from the 'new' educational settlement.*

Introduction

By the mid-1980s it had become apparent in countries like Britain and Australia that the post-war social democratic educational settlement was unravelling. After a decade marked by stagnant economic growth, persistently high unemployment and the winding back of the Welfare State, educational systems found they could not remain insulated from the demands for increased productivity within the workforce and for the 'efficiencies' trumpeted by the new managerialism. These demands expressed themselves in a variety of forms: new approaches to curriculum which stressed 'competencies'; a revived interest in vocational education in the context of industrial restructuring; and new forms of educational privatisation, which promoted decentralisation and 'accountability' as their supposed virtues.

The social democratic educational settlement which had evolved during the 1950s and 1960s had been sustained by economic and political conditions which began to change rapidly during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In Australia, during the long boom, full employment and protected manufacturing industries had allowed the state to expand its expenditure on education, health and welfare. As in Britain, social democratic reformers saw equality of educational access, express through comprehensive secondary schooling

and free tertiary education, as one of the answers to eliminating class conflict under a 'benign capitalism'. As Paul Willis expressed it:

Education seemed to offer the prospect of individual human development as well as the prospect of greater social equality. Happily these joint aims were compatible because they made the economic system more efficient anyway: there *was* a need for more skilled workers in the expanding and high technological society. It was necessary to 'dredge the pool of talent'. Furthermore the over-riding aim of social integration would be promoted because both the demands of individuals and those of a healthy economy could be satisfied. (1983, pp. 108–109)

The post-war settlement had not, however, managed to eradicate the problems of poverty and social injustice. These became the focus for a new wave of educational reform during the 1970s, partly modelled on the American 'war on poverty' of the 1960s (Levin, 1977). Armed with the findings of the Henderson Poverty Inquiry and the Karmel Report on schools, the new reformers began to move beyond the old concern with educational *access* and increasingly talked about *equality of outcomes* (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973, p. 23). One of the major initiatives which emerged, the Disadvantaged Schools Program, shared the same mould of 'compensatory education' set by its American and British predecessors (Connell *et al.*, 1991, pp. 20–39). Lurking within compensatory education, with its problematic of disadvantage, was an implicit belief that working-class students were, at best, 'culturally Odifferent'; at worst, 'culturally deprived'. This belief, which had dogged the sociology of youth during the 1950s, resurfaced in educational debates during the 1960s and 1970s. Not surprisingly, radical educational sociologists were not prepared to see this perspective pass uncontested. As early as 1970 Basil Bernstein critiqued compensatory education for its preoccupation with the characteristics of 'disadvantaged' students to the neglect of what actually took place in schools. Bernstein's own work on linguistic codes had been appropriated by the cultural deficit theorists and he was intent on refocussing educational sociology on the ways in which educational knowledge was organised within schools to systematically reproduce social inequality (Bernstein, 1970). Bernstein's concerns became a major focus during the 1970s in that area of sociology which came to be known as the New Sociology of Education (Young, 1971; Young & Whitty, 1977) and studies which vigorously rejected the 'problematic of disadvantage' emerged during the 1970s (Keddie, 1973). This radical reappraisal failed, however, to dislodge the cultural deficit assumptions within mainstream educational research, with an Australian review of the literature in the mid 1980s showing that research into 'cultural differences' was still overwhelmingly tied to the old problematic (Lamb, 1984).

Within the 'new' educational settlement which is currently emerging, the problematic of disadvantage—in terms of social class—has evaporated. Even 'equality' has been replaced with 'equity', a linguistic shuffle which accurately reflects the perspective of the new managerialism, for whom the removal of all 'subsidies'—such as free education—is the first move toward their version of 'social justice'. The category of 'disadvantage' is still present, but in a sufficiently pluralised version that it now resembles a non-threatening, motherhood-statement kind of category in which a variety of 'disadvantages' produce 'at-risk' students (disability, non-English speaking background, Aboriginal background, gender, and so on). Social class is absent from the new agenda, even in its watered-down version of 'socio-economic status'. Cultural processes are not even hinted at, so overwhelming is the language of technical solutions. Where the older problematic

had spoken of 'working-class culture' and its tension with the culture of 'middle-class schools', the new problematic refers to the same group of students as a 'wider client group with more diverse needs and ambitions' (Australian Education Council Review Committee, 1991, p. 6). Where the older problematic grappled with the cultural context outside the school, the world from which working-class students were drawn, the new problematic looks in the other direction, at the destinations it seeks for such students. It then proceeds to define its educational agenda around the needs of the workplace in the 21st century (Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1992).

While this preoccupation with linking industry and education echoes the 'manpower planning' movement of the 1950s, at the same times it does reconceptualise vocational education in important new ways. The new reformers aspire to bridge the traditional division between general and vocational education: craft-based apprenticeships are to be overturned in favour of ongoing 'career' style training; time-based credentialing is to be replaced by competency-based progression; and flexible, problem-solving skills are to displace narrow job-specific skills. The linkages between this training agenda and wider economic changes (such as award restructuring and enterprise-based productivity bargaining) are made explicit in the Australian Vocational Certificate Training System (Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1992). Its main architect, Laurie Carmichael, was also pivotal in framing the *Australia Reconstructed* (1987) strategy for revitalising the Australian trade union movement. Both initiatives are linked by their focus on the workplace of the 21st century, depicted as the post-Fordist world of flexible specialisation, value-added manufacturing, and the multi-skilled worker.

This scenario is light-years away from the world of the manual working-class hero, whose oppositional cultural practices had sustained a generation of writers working within the cultural studies tradition. The new post-Fordist factories have no room for the 'lads' who populate Paul Willis's seminal study *Learning to Labour*. The computer consoles on the factory floor provide no means to valorise manual labour, while the new career path orientation in the workplace undermines traditional working-class oppositional shop floor culture. Even without this scenario, it is clear that the last 15 years of economic restructuring have transformed forever the way we think about the post-school world. Willis's 'lads' began their working life at the tail-end of the long boom, when the problematic of disadvantage still flourished and when the issue of the school-to-work transition did actually mean *work*. By the early 1980s, when Willis's lads had reached the climax of their literary life, they had already become an anachronism in real life. A decade of high youth unemployment has seen school retention rates double and the expectation aired that by the year 2001, 90% of all 19-year-olds should have finished year 12 or be in some form of training (Employment and Skills Formation Council, 1992, p. 5). Willis's 'lads' had, by the early 1980s, become the 'at-risk' early school leavers; by the late 1990s they will probably have become the reluctant school stayers.

In the midst of these profound changes, we need to also register the continuities, and the most important of these is at the level of class relations. In terms of class formation, the post-war educational settlement was critical for consolidating the power of the 'new middle class', that fraction of the working class whose tertiary qualifications and technocratic skills set them apart from the traditional working class. In the language of segmented labour market theory (Edwards, 1979; Gordon *et al.*, 1982), the long boom saw the emergence of a *primary independent* labour market which steadily expanded to absorb the products of the post-war educational reforms. At the same time, the labour market still opened its arms to the casualties of those reforms: the *primary subordinate* labour market offered apprenticeships and routine office jobs while the *secondary* labour

market took anyone else who cared to front up at the factory door. As noted earlier, the educational problem for the social democratic reformers during this period was managing the transition between the world of school, which was increasingly structured around the aspirations of their 'new middle class' students, and the world of work, with its stultifying boredom for the vast majority. By the late 1980s, in the wake of the collapse of the youth labour market, these relationships have been overturned with the notable exception of the 'new middle class', whose prospects continue to shine. Except for casualised work in the service sector, there is virtually no segment of the labour market open to early school leavers. The 'new middle class', on the other hand, continue to consolidate their power, based as it always has been on access to tertiary qualifications and an expanding primary independent labour market.

Should this come as a surprise? In one sense, no. The 'new middle class' have been an abiding preoccupation of class theorists since at least the 1970s when the recognition of their dramatic growth in numbers and their economic and political importance, began to raise fundamental issues about the nature of class relations under advanced capitalism. Simply labelling them became a major intellectual enterprise. They were variously defined as: "a new class" (Gouldner, 1979); "a new petty bourgeoisie" (Poulantzas, 1973, 1977, 1978); "a professional-managerial class" (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1979); "a new working class" (Mallet, 1975); "a fraction of the working class" (Edwards, 1979); a class caught within a "contradictory location" (Wright, 1979); a class located within a multidimensional matrix of exploitation (Wright, 1985); and, more tentatively, a strata of the working class with access to "loyalty rents" and "credential rents" (Wright, 1989). Most class theorists agreed that the distinctive feature of this new class grouping was its critical role within production under advanced capitalism. These 'middle-class workers' were tertiary educated, possessed highly developed technical or administrative skills, and retained considerable autonomy within the labour process. In addition, they were often instrumental agents in wider social processes, providing most of the impetus for new social movements (Parkin, 1968), and playing a pivotal role in the transformations of social democratic parties and peak trade union organisations (Scott, 1991). The problem, however, was whether these workers were part of the working class or whether they constituted a distinctively new class. For Marxists concerned to preserve the classic formula of an increasingly polarised class structure under advanced capitalism, these middle-class workers were an embarrassment. Growing evidence of deskilling within the labour process and of the 'proletarianisation' of white-collar work (Braverman, 1974; Wood, 1982) failed to dislodge nagging doubts about the significant differences that still remained between a new, privileged group of workers and an increasingly vulnerable traditional working class. Yet, at the same time, sociologists keen to establish that this group constituted a distinctively new class had trouble explaining why capitalism still required of these workers the purchase of their labour power, not their 'cultural capital' (Gouldner, 1979) nor their other 'assets' (Wright, 1985).

However, this important debate went unregistered amongst the ethnographers of working-class culture based at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. During this same period they produced some classic studies of class cultures, providing us with concrete and detailed analyses of the cultural processes underlying contemporary class relations. But this important advance took place outside the context of class analysis altogether, and represented the convergence of two other traditions: the sociological genre of working class studies and the historiographical tradition of labour history studies (Cricher, 1979; Johnson, 1979a). As a result the 'new middle class' was virtually invisible within their class landscape; and certainly untheorised within their

cultural analyses. It is this invisibility, and the implications of this for how we understand class and culture, which is at the heart of my concerns in this article.

I do not revisit class and culture within the Birmingham tradition because of a nostalgic desire to anchor myself in the certainties of the 1970s. Rather, it is the very absence of the concepts of class and culture in the vocabulary of the 1990s which compels this backward glance. While there are elements within the new educational settlement, particularly its implicit challenge to the hegemonic rule of the universities within secondary schooling, which can be welcomed, there is also much about which we should be wary. To think through the new agenda, to demystify the new technocratic jargon of 'competencies' and 'pathways', we need to employ critical concepts like class and culture. We cannot, however, simply return to the old problematic and recycle its language. There were major problems with how these concepts were used in the 1970s and 1980s. An essential starting point in revitalising them, is unravelling those weaknesses.

The Birmingham Approach

Conventional criticisms of the Birmingham approach to cultural studies have stressed the narrow focus of many of the case studies, particularly the dominance of male, manual working-class subjects and the preoccupation with sub-cultural groupings. Writers in the *Resistance Through Rituals* collection were aware of these shortcomings, citing 'ignorance' as one excuse (Corrigan & Frith, 1975, p. 239).

Two of the other writers attributed the problem to their research tradition, in which a preoccupation with delinquency studies lead to a focus on "the deviant rather than conventional, on working class adolescents rather than those from intermediate and middle classes, and most crucial of all, on boys rather than girls" (Murdock & McCron, 1975, p. 204). Others hoped subsequent analyses might correct these oversights. As McRobbie and Garber noted in 1975: "Are girls ... really not active in or present in youth sub-cultures? Or has something in the way this kind of research is done rendered them invisible?" (McRobbie & Garber, 1975, p. 209). *Women Take Issue*, published in 1978, began the task of 'testing' the sub-cultural thesis of resistance in the context of working-class girls, but even here there were only McRobbie's own study on the culture of femininity and Hobson's study of the isolation of housewives to provide concrete material in this area (Hobson, 1978; McRobbie, 1978).

This preoccupation with a very narrow definition of working-class culture was not, however, an oversight stemming from empirical shortcomings. It reflected the way the Birmingham writers responded to a number of post-war intellectual challenges, responses which reinforced a romantic conception of the working class as a male, industrial proletariat. The Birmingham writers were certainly aware of the phenomenon of the 'new middle class':

We have seen the growth of the intermediate white-collar and lower managerial strata, the rise of the new professions alongside the old, a growth in the administrative and 'welfare-state' non-commercial middle classes, and new strata connected with the revolution in communications, management and marketing. (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, p. 63)

This awareness surfaced in both their concrete analyses and in their theoretical reflections. The commune movement, for example, was seen as the preserve of 'urban middle class youth' (Webster, 1975, p. 128) while the counter-culture was seen as a movement of "educated middle class youth" (Murdock & McCron, 1975, p. 199). The major theoretical pieces in both *Resistance Through Rituals* and *Working Class Culture* showed

an intriguing engagement with the problem of the new middle class. This problem was directly confronted, but not in terms of class analysis. Rather, it was raised in order to dismiss its importance. In seeking to rebut the 'affluent worker' thesis, with its notion of an "embourgeoisement of the working class" (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, pp. 25–26), and in attempting to overturn the idea of a "classless youth culture" (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, p. 21; Murdock & McCron, 1975, p. 197), several of the Birmingham writers resurrected an orthodox Marxist model of a polarised class structure: of a 19th century bourgeoisie confronting an industrial proletariat. In particular, the observations that white-collar work was being steadily deskilled and that white-collar trade unions were becoming increasingly militant during the 1960s were both used to suggest that the new middle class were really not that different to the traditional working class after all (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, pp. 25–26).

The new middle class were particularly important in the school ethnographies. Indeed, there is a sense in which they were massively present, though persistently untheorised. Willis, Robins and Cohen, and McRobbie, all made use of the 'middle class' as a key reference point in defining what was distinctive in working class culture. For Willis (1978, pp. 131, 76) there was a "*characteristically* working class" use of labour power; a distinction between working class 'jobs' and middle class 'careers'; and a sharp contrast between the culture of independence found in working-class families and the dependency relations which dominated middle-class families. In Robin and Cohen's analysis of the disjuncture between middle-class teachers (as well as youth workers) and working-class street kids, the authors highlighted the extreme differences in language and approach which each party brought to the negotiation of new encounters (1978, p. 79). Angela McRobbie's analysis of the culture of femininity contrasted the pattern of early marriage which trapped working-class girls into economic dependency, with the 'breathing space' allowed their middle-class peers by virtue of a tertiary education (1978, p. 107).

This utilisation of the middle class was particularly evident in Willis' analysis of social mobility. Like a number of socialist writers of the 1970s, Willis argued that social mobility was a ruse, that individual improvements in class position did not change the class structure:

To the class or group at its own proper level, however, mobility means nothing at all. The only true mobility at this level would be the destruction of the whole class society. (1978, p. 128)

To sustain this argument Willis followed essentially the same strategy as the Birmingham critics of the 'affluent worker' thesis. He also resurrected a sharply polarised class structure, one in which privileged workers were absent and in which the deskilling and dehumanising aspects of work made all jobs under capitalism essentially the same (1978, p. 127). While Willis probably had manufacturing industry in mind in making this claim, it is also clear that in coupling teachers, social workers, plumbers and carpenters in his discussion of abstract labour, he was following the same logic as the other Birmingham proponents of the 'proletarianisation' of the middle class (1978, p. 135).

In restricting their class analysis to this fairly crude dichotomy, these Birmingham writers denied themselves the opportunity to seriously link the new middle class into contemporary class relations, and, in particular, to analyse their culture. The Birmingham writers were well aware that the new middle class were not the capitalist class, nor were they the same as the Victorian middle class (the artisans, shopkeepers and professionals of the 19th century). Clarke and his colleagues, for example, distinguished between the 'petit-bourgeois strata' and the modern middle classes (1975, p. 65) and

Willis wrote of the middle class enjoying its privileges “not by virtue of inheritance or birth, but by virtue of an apparently proven greater competence and merit” (1978, p. 128).

However, when it came to analysing middle class sub-cultures, this careful distinction collapsed under the weight of the category ‘bourgeois youth’ (Corrigan & Frith, 1975, p. 238). Ironically, the new middle class were absorbed back into the working class when it was necessary to combat ‘embourgeoisement’ theories, but their culture was deemed to be a bourgeois culture. Possibly this cultural merger simply reflected a confusion between the historical language of class (bourgeois) and the more sociological language of class location (middle class). Corrigan, for example, repeated this merger in his analysis of ‘middle-class teachers’. Here he used class in an historical sense by suggesting that 19th century class struggles around educational ‘reform’ had concerned “three separate classes—the industrial bourgeoisie, the working class and the aristocracy” (Corrigan, 1979, p. 40). However, any coherent linkage between a 19th century capital-owning class, however middling its position during that century, and a 20th century professional grouping (like teachers) is impossible to sustain.

Moreover, in the case of *cultures in general*, and not simply sub-cultures, the merger between middle class and bourgeois by the Birmingham writers was unequivocal. The major theoretical introduction to *Resistance Through Rituals* (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, pp. 10–72) dispelled all uncertainty about where middle-class culture was located. Here, the authors developed the distinction between the collective structures developed within working-class sub-cultures and the more individualised responses of middle class youth. They then approvingly quoted Juliet Mitchell’s comment that “middle class culture” is not something separate but “it simply *is* the overall culture” (1975, p. 62).

This cursory dismissal of the specificity of the new middle class unleashed a new set of problems. If the middle class was not part of the capitalist class why was their culture seemingly equivalent to ‘bourgeois’ culture? If, as many of the Birmingham studies showed, cultures developed in a unique fashion by articulating the experiences of class relations (refracted in crucial ways by gender, age, urban space, and so on), why didn’t this formula hold for the middle class, whose ‘class experiences’ were not identical to those of the capitalist class?

How did the Birmingham writers end up in this predicament? A partial answer to these questions can be found in their conception of culture, a conception which initially promised great analytical flexibility but, through an infusion of Althusserian blood, ultimately developed rigor mortis.

Sub-cultures, Cultures and Dominant Culture

In *Resistance Through Rituals* (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, pp. 10–13) culture was defined as the ‘expressive form’ which ‘social groups’ gave to their material life experience. On this basis, a definition of class cultures was constructed as the ‘major cultural configurations’ in modern societies. Sub-cultures were then seen as a sub-set, or a ‘more localised and differentiated’ version, within the ‘larger cultural networks’ (also termed the ‘parent culture’). In this way, sub-cultures were viewed as having their own ‘focal concerns’ but also sharing elements from the parent culture. Thus, the style of dress adopted by the Teds was sub-cultural, but their “group life and intense loyalty” reflected the traditional values of their parent working-class culture (Jefferson, 1975, p. 81). The strength of this framework was its generality: it could deal with ‘cultures’ that emerged from other social relations apart from class, such as those of gender and ethnicity. Moreover, it could also

strike a balance within the structure/agency tension, allowing for both the transformative dimension of cultural activity (sub-cultural innovations) as well as the reproductive dimension implicit in selecting from an existing cultural repertoire[1].

However, overlaying this cultural pattern was another schema: that of dominant and sub-ordinate cultures in which “sub-cultures must *also* be analysed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture—the overall disposition of cultural power in the society as a whole” (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, p. 13). Despite the sophistication of this framework, with its differentiated layers of cultural forms—dominant and subordinate each with the potential for sub-cultures within them[2]—problems emerged once *class* was given primacy in defining the (one) dominant culture: “they are all subordinate sub-cultures, in relation to the dominant middle-class or bourgeois culture” (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, p. 13). Thus, not only did this line of argument resurrect the confusing collapse of middle class into bourgeois, but it also meant that a ‘dominant culture’ which was also *white* and *male* was unproblematically defined as a dominant *class* culture.

The surprising thing about the claim of class primacy was that it flew against the flexibility of the ‘multiple cultures’ framework which had been so laboriously constructed. Not only had ‘cultural power’ been defined as a scale, but cultural struggles were seen as dispersed throughout society, with dominant and subordinate *cultures* in processes of contestation. We were advised, in the course of this argument, to replace the notion of ‘culture’ with the more concrete, historical concept of ‘cultures’ (Clarke, *et al.*, 1975, p. 12). The place that was left for a general term like ‘culture’ was that of the ‘large cultural configurations’, a kind of shorthand for summing up the state of play of these ongoing cultural struggles.

What overturned this apparent flexibility was the intrusion of a theory of ideology. Indeed the dominant and subordinate framework was used as the basis for distinguishing between culture and ideology:

when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture *experiences* itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, p. 12)

Lying behind this argument were two of the key Birmingham ‘foreign imports’—Althusser’s theory of ideology and Gramsci’s theory of hegemony—both of which became the major concerns of the later collection *On Ideology* (1977). The ethnographic sub-cultural literature made extensive use of the concepts of ‘misrecognition’ and the ‘imaginary relation’, both borrowed from Althusser’s essay on ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ (1971). In that essay they played a double role for Althusser. They provided a device for contesting Marxist theories of ideology as illusion by promoting the notion that ideology was material. Secondly, they allowed Althusser to construct ‘a sociological theory of subjectivity’ which virtually sealed falsity into the very construction of consciousness. Not all the Birmingham writers accepted these two underlying arguments, with Richard Johnson in particular offering cogent criticisms (Johnson, 1979a, pp. 67–70; Johnson, 1979b, pp. 227–230), but most of the sub-cultural theorists consistently employed these concepts in an Althusserian fashion.

Gramsci’s notion of ‘hegemony’ was recruited to reinforce the materialist drive of this position. Hegemony was seen to work:

primarily by inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structures which support the power and social authority of the dominant order.

It is, above all, in these structures and relations that a subordinate class *lives its subordination*. (Clarke, *et al.*, 1975, p. 39)

The argument about institutional incorporation was a useful one, and its elaboration in Corrigan and Frith's article on educational incorporation was convincing. But the notion that subordinate groups experienced themselves in the terms of the dominant culture was highly problematic. As Corrigan and Frith themselves reminded us: "working class experience, even of bourgeois institutions, is not bourgeois experience" (Corrigan & Frith, 1975, p. 236). It was the Althusserian framework, in which a dominant ideology 'cemented' all subordinate groups into their social relations while falsely structuring their consciousness, which lead down this slippery path. By contrast, ethnographies (for example Willis, 1978; Angus, 1986; Valli, 1986) which have stressed the creativity of cultural practices have arrived at a different conception of the relationship between ideology and experience. Here, however much the 'official' discourse of the institution might embody a dominant ideology, the cultural practices of both students and teachers represent creative processes in which that discourse is reworked at a pragmatic and informal level. As a consequence, there can be no neat fit between the dominant ideology of the institution and the lived experience of its members.

In contrast to a theory of dominant culture or dominant ideology, I would argue in favour of a framework of historically determined cultural productions (Watson, 1990, pp. 139–141). We should view cultural practices as processes which involve the production of meaning under specific, historical social relations. Ideologies can be regarded as subsets within cultural production, distinguished by their more formalised structure, their particular social relations of production (the product of 'intellectuals'; Gramsci, 1971), and their systematic deployment within political struggles (McCarney, 1980). Their dominance is always contingent, dependent on the flux of those struggles. Moreover, the epistemological status of an ideology—its falsity or otherwise—is equally contingent. My argument, that cultural productions are always historically determined, does not undercut the notion of cultural domination. Rather, it simply guards against viewing such domination as a necessary outcome, as some kind of constitutive part of our definition of ideology.

Class and Culture

It was not simply ill-chosen theoretical borrowings which were responsible for the conceptual difficulties faced by the Birmingham writers in dealing with dominant cultures and with the new middle class. Their ethnographic methodology also contributed. This can be seen when we ask a fairly basic question of an ethnographer: what constitutes a cultural group? Despite a certain level of self-awareness, the sub-cultural researchers persisted in studying subjects who were the exception, not the norm; the 'deviant', not the conventional. This not only raised those problems of representativeness highlighted by Connell (1983, p. 224), but this approach also exposed the researcher to the anthropological vice of 'subject self-definition'. The coherence of the group was a self-selected one and the 'culture' of that group was its immediate cultural forms. Thus in choosing to study highly visible skinheads or Rastafarians, for instance, ethnographers were provided by their subjects with a coherent cultural group.

However, in the absence of such distinct sub-cultures, how was the cultural group to be chosen? One response, chosen by some of the school ethnographers, was to define their subjects in specific class terms and in terms of their labour power. This meant the

researchers located themselves in homogeneous working-class areas and then focused on early school leavers. Thus Corrigan set out to study kids from a “fairly homogeneous working-class area in an urban environment” (1979, p. 8) while Willis focused on “an absolutely characteristic working class inter-war council estate” in a “Midlands nut and bolts town” (1978, pp. 4–5). In both cases, the working class chosen was the classic smoke-stack working class, a choice which made it easy to identify linkages between an anti-school sub-culture and an outside workplace occupational culture. While still not free from subject self-selection (‘the lads’ and ‘the ear’oles’), this strategy of locating oneself within an homogeneous setting [3] did at least avoid a purely empiricist definition of cultural groups. But it was only possible because it persisted with the very narrow conception of the working class discussed earlier. Such a strategy could not cope with a more heterogeneous working class, especially with that fraction identified as the ‘new middle class’.

Ethnographers who approached their subjects with less guidance from concepts like class and labour power left themselves wide open to the anthropologist’s vice and its associated empiricism. Jim Walker, for instance, set out with the classic ‘immersion in a way of life’ approach and produced an analysis in which the notion of a ‘cultural group’ lost all theoretical rigour. Some of the groups in his study of a Sydney inner city school had a certain coherence and a linkage to the wider society (such as ‘the Greeks’) while others were barely coherent at all (‘the handballers’). As for the group he labelled ‘the three friends’, it is hard to concede that they really qualified for the title of ‘group’ at all (1988, pp. 51, 52, 55).

When it came to linking class with culture, the weaknesses in the Birmingham sub-cultural approach became most pronounced. Despite an awareness of the considerable range within cultural production, from the more ephemeral forms such as ‘style’ to the more enduring institutions such as education, the Birmingham sub-cultural studies collapsed what a critical realist (Bhaskar, 1989) would argue is a multi-levelled social reality into a basically two-tiered structure of class and culture, in which the former was consistently privileged and the latter rendered derivative. This dualism was a legacy from their intellectual ancestors, as well as an occupational hazard from focusing on cultural forms as a starting point. In one of their reflections on method, the Birmingham ethnographers noted that an “adequate cultural analysis within a Marxist tradition” consisted of “deducing ... cultural features from basic economic structures” (Grimshaw, *et al.*, 1980, p. 76). While in practice their ethnography worked in the opposite direction—reading off class relations from cultural forms—the Birmingham commitment toward seeking homologies between the two realms rarely moved beyond this notorious dualism. The Althusserian imports reinforced this tendency. With their division between the ‘real terrain’ and the ‘imaginary relations’, all that these Althusserian excavators had to do was dig beneath the cultural form to unearth the class reality lying beneath. This method of decoding has been severely criticised by Connell for its superficiality (1983, p. 229), but my main concern here is its methodological implications. Not only did it reduce what should have been a multi-staged process of abstraction into a simplistic one-step decoding, but it also only worked in one direction: class was understood by reading culture. Murdock and McCron noted the dilemma when this decoding exercise was shifted into reverse:

Subcultural studies start by taking distinctive subcultural styles and the groups who are involved in them, and then working backwards to uncover their class base. The result is an elegant and eminently plausible account of the ho-

mologous relation between cultural styles and structural situations. If this procedure is reversed however, and the analysis starts from the class location rather than from the cultural response, a serious problem presents itself, as it soon becomes apparent that the same structural location can generate and sustain a variety of responses and modes of accommodation. (1975, p. 205)

As well as this weakness, the decoding procedure was also subject to a particular blindness in terms of theoretical reflectiveness. In practice, the structural situation could only be 'read off' because the sub-cultural theorist already had an implicit understanding of how structural relations such as class or gender were organised. But if these structural relations were not themselves an object of enquiry, not the starting point for precise historical analysis, then an obvious outcome was that any untheorised phantoms were left unchecked. Hence, the confusion that ensued when the concepts of 'middle class' and 'bourgeois ideology' made their entrance.

In his later reflections on *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis confronted this dilemma of finding the balance between structural determination and cultural creativity. Willis highlighted the enduring failure of reproduction theories to come to terms with *cultural production*, that form of cultural creativity which is always subject to restraint, but which, at the same time, is constitutive of those same restraining structures. In arguing for this dialectical relation between subjects and structures, Willis noted the crude dichotomy which has plagued much cultural theorising:

our general theoretical view should not be to pose authentic 'class subjects' against hostile, surrounding but separate symbolic and material structures—'subjects' who can be inflated into working class heroes, or deflated into working class dummies, depending on whether they are seen as squashed or as squashing 'structure'. (1983, p. 134)

However, to realise this perspective in practice requires more than just a two-way traffic between subject and structure. It requires a simultaneous engagement with the ethnography of the subject and the history of the structure. We need not a decoding of one, but a recoding of both. I will return to this issue in my conclusion.

The School Ethnographies

As mentioned earlier, the problem of the untheorised middle class was particularly evident in the school ethnographies, where class differences played an important role in explaining the 'educational failure' of working-class youth. Both Willis and Corrigan, for example, distinguished the 'career orientation' of middle-class kids from that of their working-class peers. For the latter, jobs were "full of boredom and insecurity" (Corrigan, 1979, p. 92) because "Most work in industry is basically meaningless" (Willis, 1978, p. 127). Consequently, job choices by working-class kids were not decisions about a career trajectory, but an instrumental acceptance of the "expectation of alienated labour" (Corrigan, 1979, p. 80). Willis linked this cultural meaning of work to the educational experiences of working-class 'resisters' and argued that the counter-school practices of 'the lads' conditioned them into acceptance of the dehumanising side of manual labouring while at the same time preparing them to survive the demands of the workplace:

When 'the lads' arrive on the shopfloor they need no telling to 'take it easy', 'take no notice', or that 'they [management] always want more, you've had it if you let them get their way'. (1978, p. 130)

This observation was shared by Robins and Cohen when they noted that:

Those who are most adept at classroom guerilla warfare may also find the transition to work easiest. Their 'bad' school record ensures that they are forced into the kind of unskilled work where 'mucking about', leaning on brooms, and other means of resisting the impositions of boredom and routine, are an integral and accepted part of shop-floor culture. (1978, p. 10)

This theory that school resistance was somehow functional to the post-school lives of working-class kids and that it also contained the potential for progressive change (Willis's theory of penetrations) was severely criticised by subsequent school ethnographers (e.g. Jim Walker, 1986; Lindley Walker, 1989). Indeed, most of these ethnographies self-consciously distanced themselves from the resistance thesis, whilst still focusing on those students most likely to follow in the steps of Willis' 'lads'.

Jim Walker's study of an inner city school (1988) moved well outside the Birmingham tradition. Not only did Walker strongly reject the resistance thesis (1986), but he also developed a theoretical position that was largely incompatible with the approach to class and culture developed at Birmingham. However, in rejecting what he saw as the dualism of that tradition, Walker also abandoned the considerable theoretical capital which the Birmingham studies had amassed. Despite the problems with resistance theory, it was nevertheless able to focus on the structural contradictions located in the intersection between schooling and labour markets. Walker replaced this sophistication with a series of empiricist, common-sense observations: his study spoke of students who failed because they had low self-esteem (1988, p. 67) or were late-developers (1988, p. 122); and of students who succeeded because their ethnic background made them competitive (1988, pp. 129, 136).

Walker's most theoretically informed argument was the notion that the more academically successful students were those whose culture converged with that of the teachers, that the strength of this 'intercultural articulation' determined the likely success of educational outcomes (1988, p. 157). Where cultural divergence was great, as at Walker's school, 'Stokeham', then success could only come from teachers developing cultural 'touchstones' that expanded the range of common interests between the two groups (1988, p. 158). For Walker the main reason that cultural divergence was so great at Stokeham was that the teachers were middle class and the students working class. Yet, despite the heavy reliance on this class contrast for the cultural theory to work, the middle class were as nebulous in Walker's study as they were in the Birmingham studies. At times, the middle class were those who lived in the 'more prosperous localities' (1988, pp. 72, 132), at other times it was their attachment to an 'academic professional culture' (1988, pp. 169, 114) which defined them. In both cases, Walker's class analysis was the same analysis as that of his working-class subjects, who also defined their class relations in terms of territoriality (1988, p. 47) and professionalism (1988, p. 111–112).

The school ethnographies which focused on working-class girls relied crucially on the working-class/middle-class contrast. Angela McRobbie, for example, argued that despite a commonality in being "pushed in the direction of the home", "middle class girls are directed to different kinds of jobs than working class girls" (1978, p. 102). For McRobbie, this class difference was manifest in a range of cultural practices within the school whereby the working-class girls contemptuously distanced themselves from the middle-class girls, whom they saw as 'swots' and 'snobs'. In so doing, they also distanced themselves from those practices—such as application, diligence and conscientiousness—most likely to lead to educational success. Thus, for McRobbie, the "under achievement"

of the girls was a result of “a whole set of class, sex and ‘anti-school’ articulations” (1978, p. 103).

Claire Thomas’s study (1980) also reinforced McRobbie’s view of the commonality of a domestic occupation for most girls, but her distinction between the middle-class and working-class girls highlighted important internal differences in the ‘culture of femininity’. While the oppositional middle-class girls in her study maintained their attachment to the ‘culture of femininity’, the working-class girl resisters developed a very different femininity from that of their middle-class peers: they constructed an image of themselves as ‘tough, worldly and unromantic’, an image which ‘positively shrieked at conventional notions of femininity’ (1980, pp. 145, 146, 149). Consequently, while the middle-class ‘resisters’ rejected the academic demands of the school, they did not reject the school as such, steering themselves through the secretarial strand towards jobs in that traditional feminine occupation. For the working-class girl resisters, however, opposition was directed against the authority of the school and “more often assumed a sexual than an intellectual focus” (1980, p. 148). For these girls, their preoccupation was with a future based on childbirth and motherhood, rather than romance and marriage (1980, p. 152).

Like Willis and McRobbie, Thomas also saw school failure in terms of ‘self-elimination’, of a pattern of school resistance which lead the girls to “actively collaborate in the reproduction of their subordinate social and material position” (1980, p. 132). By contrast, Lindley Walker’s study of working-class girls strongly contested the self-elimination thesis in favour of the argument that a traditionalist teaching paradigm actively eliminated working class ‘resisters’, a group whom the teachers defined as ‘trouble-makers’ but who, in Walker’s study, showed themselves to be strongly committed towards gaining educational qualifications. Walker argued that such a teaching paradigm was more than just an educational approach:

It is an exceptionally reliable political tool which supports, maintains and generates the class structure. It is teachers who decide, on the basis of their professional praxes, who is educable and who is not. (1989, p. 237)

Walker’s study also found that working-class ‘resisters’ displayed the same kind of ‘rough’ femininity which Thomas found (and the same discrepancy between the appearance of bawdiness and the reality of propriety) and that this femininity was an important component of their classroom practices. However, for Walker the notion that such femininity displaced educational motivations was wrong; the seeds of the girls’ ‘educational failure’ lay in the educational practices of the school itself, particularly the withdrawal of the major educational resource offered by the school: the teachers (1989, p. 267).

An important part of Walker’s argument was the distinction between middle-class girls and working-class girls. The girls in Walker’s study drew this contrast strongly themselves by identifying the academically successful girls as the ‘posh kids’. Walker then suggested that whereas feminism had prised an opening within the school for advancement by this group of girls, for the working-class girls no such gender equality was available. Indeed, the same set of behaviours or attributes would be evaluated by the school according to the social class of their bearers: assertive behaviour from middle-class girls was met with approval, from working-class girls it was seen as ‘troublemaking’ (1989, p. 267). In arguing that the middle-class girls were not subjected to the same sexual discrimination and class insults which the working-class girls suffered, Walker highlighted how the nexus between gender and class was fashioned outside the cultural practices of the girls. Their

immersion in the ‘culture of femininity’ was an effect, not a cause of their educational failure (1989, p. 265).

Despite these three studies relying heavily on the distinction between working-class girls and middle-class girls, the latter group remained untheorised throughout the analyses. For McRobbie, the distinction was based on a contrast between public housing and adjacent private dwellings. For Thomas, it was between two state schools, one located in “a predominantly working class neighbourhood” and the other in “a predominantly middle class community” (1980, p. 137), a distinction which also paralleled fathers’ occupations. For Lindley Walker, the class difference was also linked to a contrast between urban areas and parents’ occupations, though the notion of cultural capital also played an important role in explaining class mobility (1989, p. 259).

If we wish to conceive of class as a dynamic process and not a static background, then we must focus on the way people *enter class relations*, and the processes whereby they collectively reproduce (and transform) those relations. Consequently, if we examine the student’s own occupational histories we may find useful insights into their class relations (for example, via their linkages with segmented labour markets {Edwards, 1979}), but if we focus on the occupations of their *parents*, we all too readily slide into an analysis of ‘class background’. Similarly, urban space is certainly structured by social class, but using suburban location to provide a definition of class is surely a circular exercise (‘the working class are those who live in working class suburbs’). At best, suburban location may be a useful sampling guide. Even here, however, it offers little help in grappling with all the middling ‘class positions’ found in ‘mixed’ suburbs. As mentioned earlier, the Birmingham ethnographies largely avoided this dilemma by ensuring that their suburbs conformed to ‘characteristically’ working class urban areas.

An Ethnography of the New Middle Class

One school ethnography which carefully theorised class was Peter Aggleton’s study, *Rebels without a Cause?* (1987), which examined school ‘failure’ amongst the children of the new middle class. Aggleton’s study focussed on the cultural practices amongst families of the new middle class, specifically people who worked in academic, teaching and artistic occupations. Despite coming from families ‘high in cultural capital’ (1987, p. 12), Aggleton’s ‘resisters’ achieved poorly in their final school examinations. Aggleton’s analysis suggested that those cultural practices within the family which emphasised the importance of ‘culturally acceptable experiences’ (1987, pp. 51, 58–59) were critical for how these young people fared in their schooling. Because of their stress on authenticity, personal fulfilment and individual creativity, these family-based cultural practices clashed sharply with the more regimented culture of the school. As well as engendering a form of middle-class school resistance, such cultural practices also undermined those habits of diligence and application to study which were necessary for academic achievement (1987, p. 73–74).

Thus, as with some of the other school ethnographies, Aggleton also unearthed a ‘mismatch’ between the culture of the home and that of the school. However, unlike their working-class peers, Aggleton’s students were not penalised in the labour market for their educational shortcomings. Six years after the study, at a time of high youth unemployment, all were in paid employment. Interestingly, their jobs were overwhelmingly located in industries linked to the media and the fine arts (1987, p. 135). Their cultural capital had, indeed, paid off in the long run.

Despite the insights which Aggleton offered into how cultural capital is transmitted

between generations, his picture of new middle class culture was only partial. Indeed, the distinctive cultural practices of the families in Aggleton's sample were due to the convergence of their occupational culture—as workers involved with 'processes of symbolic control' (1987, p. 18)—and of their own artistic interests and practices. But the latter is not necessarily widespread amongst the new middle class. It is more likely that the cultural capital nurtured by new middle class families who were less artistically active than Aggleton's families may well be severely devalued if their children were to follow the path trod by Aggleton's sample, particularly if their cultural capital required further education to realise its value (as with many professional occupations).

Thus, despite its serious engagement with the literature on class analysis, Aggleton's study was still trapped within the limitations of ethnographic methodology where the problem of *representativeness* invariably weakened attempts at constructing general accounts of class cultures. It was a particular section within the new middle class whose culture emerged from the pages of *Rebels Without a Cause*? Some of their cultural practices, such as the constant flow of outsiders through their homes, seemed closer to the values of 'neighbourhood and community' ascribed by some writers to the traditional working class (Dwyer *et al.*, 1984, p. 50) than to the individualised privacy commonly associated with the new middle class.

Conclusion

How much should we ask of an ethnography that it be 'representative'? After all, we are rightly suspicious of any study which claims to capture the cultural practices of a 'typical' working-class population. But, on the other hand, we are also likely to feel cheated by disclaimers like: "the findings of this study only relate to these two groups of girls and are not necessarily valid for other members of their respective social classes" (Thomas, 1980, p. 137fn). Such limitations make any cumulative understanding of class and culture elusive.

Certainly, we should not ask of an ethnography that it match a sociological survey in the way in which the characteristics of its sample might be generalised. That is not its province: it is primarily the revelation of the complexity within cultural processes which has always been the hallmark of ethnography. In her ethnographic study of the school to office-work transition of a group of working-class girls, Linda Valli highlights this contrast. She argues that the single case study method does pose difficulties in distinguishing between 'systematic' and 'idiosyncratic' processes in the school. But against this weakness, it offers "the opportunity to intensively analyze linkages between the school, the students' culture and office labor processes" (Valli, 1986, p. 215). For Valli, as for many ethnographers, unravelling the complexity of the linkages between processes is only possible with a close focus study conducted over a considerable period of time.

Acknowledging this special province does not, however, remove the problem. Many ethnographers implicitly make claims that the social dynamics they reveal are not restricted to the particular world of their sample, thus reviving in a new way the issue of 'representativeness'. Similarly, theorists who employ these ethnographies often stake larger claims. The practices of Willis' 'lads', for example, have come to represent 'working class culture' in much subsequent sociological literature (see, for example, Dwyer *et al.*, 1984).

The comparative method offers an important avenue for moving beyond this impasse. By carefully selecting a number of samples whose characteristics highlight important social divisions, ethnographers can still engage in close focus study whilst also guarding

against an unwarranted universalising of the particular. Jean Anyon's work on social class and school knowledge illustrated this approach. Her 1981 study, for example, spanned two working-class schools, two middle-class schools (though one was more affluent than the other) and one school which serviced the capitalist class. Unfortunately, despite her advances in linking class and culture in a more representative fashion, Anyon's study suffered from its failure to engage critically with class analysis. Her class map was essentially one based on the ownership of wealth. While Anyon's 'middle class' school and her 'affluent professional' school seemed quite distinct in terms of family incomes, on other criteria such as occupation, cultural capital, or labour process characteristics, the boundary was quite arbitrary, with accountants and middle-managers in one group, doctors and interior designers in the other.

Despite these shortcomings, Anyon's study does indicate the importance of devising a 'class spectrum' when framing a sample. Such an approach need not mimic stratification theory and aim for a full coverage of all 'locations', but it should try to render our depiction of working class communities more complete than the image conveyed in the simplistic 'industrial proletariat' definition. One illuminating example of this can be found within the Birmingham tradition. Phil Cohen's studies of London's East End (Cohen 1976; Robins & Cohen, 1978) offered a diverse class map which not only made historically informed distinctions within the 'traditional working class'—the 'labour aristocracy', the respectables and the lumpen—but it also situated one segment of the new middle class—those professionals who gentrified the area—within the same 'neighbourhood ecology'. The overall analysis, moreover, was also carefully linked to the transformation of the local economy, a process in which immigration and urban redevelopment were historically significant.

In the task of revitalising the language of class and culture, and pressing them into service in the educational debates of the 1990s, we need to forcefully jettison any notion of class as a category, particularly class as social 'background'. Such a perspective is almost unavoidable within survey methodologies, with even Marxists like Erik Olin Wright ultimately losing the relational grip which class analysis should provide. Fortunately, ethnographies are ideally placed to emphasise this relational dimension: their emphasis on practices and on collective social processes guards against the sociological vice of categorising relational elements. However, as this article has suggested, class 'background' can all too easily re-enter through the back door by virtue of a number of other weaknesses. In sliding too easily into the dualisms of working class/middle class and class relations/cultural practices, the ethnographers examined in this article have undermined the rigour of these concepts. To use 'class' in its strongly relational sense we need to employ a more comparative method at the empirical level, and a more sophisticated class analysis at the theoretical level. Similarly, to analysis structural determinations in non-dualistic ways, and this applies to economic, political or cultural structures, we need more fully developed histories of such structures. It is not good enough to argue that the structures are already formed, are simply there to be 'read off' from the cultural practices; nor is it sufficient to argue that the structures are simply the product of such cultural practices. Structures have a history of their own, which gives them their *reproductive* logic. But they also, at one and the same time, possess a dimension open to *transformation* (Bhaskar, 1989), an arena in which the creativity of cultural practices finds expression.

In practical terms, 'class' and 'culture' are indispensable in confronting the hard questions of the 1990s. What is the new configuration of class relations emerging from economic restructuring: are we witnessing the disappearance of the 'middle class' and the

emergence of an 'underclass', or are these journalistic clichés masking an enduring pattern of class relations? How does the new wave of decentralised schooling, with its calls for 'accountability to the community', intersect with this new configuration? What does the new vocationalism mean at the level of cultural practices and critical pedagogy? In particular, does the promise of a democratised, post-Fordist workplace suggest significant cracks may open within the traditionally narrow conservatism of technical education? Finally, will we see the autonomy and intellectual fulfilment enjoyed by the new middle class extended to the manual working class, or is this only a rhetorical flourish to win acceptance for a new technocratic élitism?

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NOTES

- [1] For an insightful discussion of the reproduction/transformation couplet, see Bhaskar (1989, pp. 66–88).
- [2] And within this schema the middle-class youth revolt of the 1960s can be seen as a sub-culture within the dominant culture. (Clarke *et al.*, 1975, pp. 65–67).
- [3] In fact, Willis's school was far from homogeneous in terms of ethnicity because it contained "substantial West Indian and Asian minorities" (1978, p. 4). But, given the absence of these groups in Willis's ethnography, the homogeneous class setting was obviously 'right' for him. Willis's own explanation was that he was seeking the 'clarity and incision' which this narrow focus gave him (1978, p. 2).

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