The Lives of Working Class Academics

Getting Ideas Above Your Station

Edited by

Iona Burnell Reilly

The Lives of Working Class Academics

This compelling anthology of stories from academics who identify as having a working-class background offers new insights into our understanding of the relationship between academia and class.

Offering a substantial contribution to the body of research that uses autoethnography, the volume opens a platform for academic authors to reflect on their own lived experience through critical study of oneself and one's own socio-cultural context. The book is a useful resource for autoethnographic research and readers who want to understand the lived experiences of becoming a higher education professional; they will see farther and more clearly through the authors' lenses.

Although a working-class heritage underpins the autoethnography of each of the writers, the intersections of social class with race and gender are also explored, providing in-depth knowledge about personal journeys into academic life.

While the legacy of elitism remains in higher education, and with very little history or class culture in the field of higher education to identify with, the volume can give voice to and authenticate the authors' experiences, and more importantly, challenge the dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate elitism and exclusion within higher education.

'The collection provides a solid foundation for students and academics, of important questions being asked about transitioning into academic life.'
Professor Giorgia Doná, Co-director of the Centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging, University of East London

This book fully explores the developmental journey and experiences of working-class academics, using an affective approach which brings together class, race, ethnicity, gender and the intersection between them.

Class issues that have long been sidelined are finally foregrounded and examined through a critical conversation focusing on the lives of academics whose backgrounds diverge from the middle-class norm.

The book provides a platform for the authors to discuss who they are as academics, their family backgrounds and what it means to be a professional in the academy.

Burnell Reilly invites working-class academics to write about their careers in higher education. This use of autoethnography is important as it generates a profound understanding of the lived experiences of individuals.

The work is compelling and makes a significant contribution to our insights into the predicament of working-class academics. The book, therefore, has the potential to improve efforts to encourage more inclusive approaches to supporting the recruitment and advancement of those from less traditional backgrounds.

Dr Victoria Showunmi, Associate Professor, Institute of Education, University College London

This inspirational book critically analyses and reflects upon the journeys of colleagues from a working-class background into the perceived higher echelons of academia, using autoethnography as its methodology. The stories are honest and impactful as they describe the often not straight-forward routes into higher education. Instead, the routes meander through education, seizing opportunities as they arise. Many academics recognise the imposter syndrome and feelings of not belonging in a certain arena, with notions of class, race, gender, sexuality and identity firmly ingrained into the culture. However, the contributors to this book have demonstrated a tenacity and attitude towards learning that has led them to where they are now, warriors and champions of widening participation.

This book will be useful to academics to reflect upon their own journeys but mainly to all who think that higher education and the world of academia is 'not for them', based upon their views and experiences of class, etc. Being the first in one's family to attend higher education and then pursue a career in it may feel challenging and daunting and could be accompanied by a sense of loss (of identity) and betrayal (of background). This book acknowledges those feelings through its reflexive and often cathartic accounts while also demonstrating what can be achieved.

Dr Jodi Roffey-Barentsen, School of Education, University of Brighton

As a postgraduate student, I have found this collection of autoethnographic studies to be an enlightening experience when considering my approach to my studies. The format of these autoethnographic findings has shown that there is another way possible, a way that allows a deeper examination of a subject that

is so close to me and that allows me the scope to delve into it intensely. This collection has shown me the importance of personal power when discussing issues relevant to the self and how utilisation of that power can be cathartic while creating a deeper understanding from the perspective of the writer.

This interesting compilation has been invaluable to me as I take my next steps along my educational path, giving a powerful insight into how others have used an autoethnographical approach to critically examine a variety of subjects. The book has been able to show the scope of this method and its possible uses within my work and I am sure it will be a helpful starting point for other students who are considering the possible structure of their studies.

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The Lives of Working Class Academics: Getting Ideas Above Your Station

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

In honour of my grandmothers:
Anna Teresa Byrd[1]*, née Reilly*
and
May Beatrice Bridgman, née Loynds

[1]'Byrd', formerly 'Bird', is a pseudo-translation of the Irish surname 'MacEneaney' (MacLysaght, E., *More Irish Families,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: UK, 1996). Although many variations of the spelling exist, MacEneaney is an anglicised form of an original Irish Gaeilge name (according to my great-aunt), recorded as 'Mac an Éanaigh' (Woulfe, P., *Irish Names and Surnames,* published by M.H Gill and Son, Dublin: Ireland, 1922) in Ulster.

Anglicisation of Irish names was commonplace in Ireland and intensified during the seventeenth century, a period known as the 'Penal Laws' (Cusack, M., http://www.libraryireland.com/historyIreland/penal-laws.php), in a bid to reduce Irish identity and enhance British control of the country. This was Britain's attempt to oppress Ireland, the culture and the language. The Gaelic Revival movement of the nineteenth century caused many people to reclaim their indigenous names (Smyth, W.J., http://publish.ucc.ie/doi/atlas). The 1737 penal law, banning the use of Irish in the courts, was recently repealed following a community-led campaign for an Irish Language Act in the north of Ireland (www.irishlegal.com/articles/centuries-long-ban-on-irish-language-in-northern-ireland-courts-to-be-scrapped).

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Dr Teresa Crew is a Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at Bangor University and a Senior HEA Fellow. In 2020 she published a book on working-class academics entitled *Higher Education and Working-Class Academics: Precarity and Diversity in Academia*. Her research and teaching interests centre around the broad area of class and social inequalities.

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Dr Peter Shukie is programme leader for Education Studies and Action Research lead in College Based Higher Education in East Lancashire. His PhD focussed on community engagement in technology through Community Open Online Courses, where everyone can teach and learn, for free. Dr Shukie imagined, then made real, the collective that led to the Working Class Academics Conference and

continues to advocate for working-class voices in the ways we create a new academy.

Dr Hannah Walters is at King's College, London. Hannah is a feminist sociologist of youth with particular interest in girlhood and the intersections of class and gender. Her work uses participatory and creative methods underpinned by the principles of feminist research. She tweets at: @hanwalt.

Dr ML White is a Senior Lecturer in Teacher Education at Moray House School of Education & Sport, University of Edinburgh. She is interested in how we prepare beginner teachers to work in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, reaching and teaching students in poverty and exploring pedagogies that support a transformative and activist orientation. ML is also interested in civic media practices, social geography and how we experience space and place in education and learning.

Professor Marcia A. Wilson works at the Open University as the Dean for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI). She is responsible for embedding the EDI agenda across the institution. Her work includes equality projects with Universities UK, and she has an interest in racial trauma in sport. She is a multiple award winner and uses her platform to raise awareness about inequalities to generate institutional and sector-wide change.

Dr Steve Wong is a Senior Lecturer of Education Studies at the University of East London and Lecturer of Applied Linguistics at UCL Institute of Education in London. His research interests relate to the broad areas of language and social interaction, and cultures of hybridity arising from the intersection of language(s), race and ethnicities. His work is informed by cross-disciplinary understandings of sociology, sociolinguistics, cultural studies, anthropology and education studies. His research takes the linguistic ethnographic approach.

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Foreword

> Academia has rarely developed complex understandings of working-class people.
>
> (Reay, 1997, p. 18)

This book is a collection of autoethnographically inflected accounts of what it is like to be working class and what it is to be a working class academic. Perhaps the most transformative aspect of this collection lies in its approach towards writing working-classness – through auto-ethnographies produced by working class academics. For some time, there have been problems in the way that class is applied in education research – there has been a tendency towards understandings that have ignored some of the significant and meaningful ways in which class is lived and class is done. There have been some major oversights such as the primacy often given to white male experiences and 'the possibility of a complex trajectory for people who remain working-class is often denied' (Reay, 1997, p. 19). In addition, there have been problems with the ways in which class has been theorised and analysed. Some time ago, Rosemary Crompton (1998, p. 114) warned that 'it is not possible to construct a single measure which could successfully capture all the elements going to make up social class – or even structured social inequality'. Nevertheless, work on class and education can sometimes seem inert and stuck, relying on proxies such as the receipt of free school meals rather than more powerful and complex approaches. The chapters in this collection include diverse and situated accounts from a set of academics who all identify as working class (in different ways) and whose various narratives challenge the sorts of shortcomings I have described here.

There have been some notable developments in class theory that have enlarged our critical horizons. Here I am thinking about the ways in which we recognise that there are 'very many different ways of being working-class' (Reay, 2017, p. 5). First, there are fractions of class, and these are fluid, shifting according to economic changes and individual experiences of turmoil and distress, where families edge out of being part of the 'respectable' working class and teeter haphazardly on the border of being 'rough'. There are emotional ambivalences, and sometimes high costs, attached to this shifting between being, and not being, respectable. Social class is also powerfully shaped by place – by attention and commitment to 'home' and where we come from, as well as where we may have settled in our journeys from our working-class origins to our jobs in the academy. Any work on class and education may be limited if it does not speak of space and place; from the recognition of access to privilege and limits to social goods,

perhaps because of poor transport and high travel costs for example, space and place are strongly implicated in social reproduction and the ways in which class inscribes itself in the lives of us all. There are also other differences too – differences of accent and how we speak – differences in the language we use to speak and write of ourselves and others.

And then there is diversity and intersectionality. Social identities and our classed identities are sculpted out of the structural and material resources that are available to us. These resources that speak powerfully to us, about who we are and may be and desire to be, are amalgams of discourses from our gendered selves, our ethnicity, our embodied selves, our sexualities. They are also constructed out of our age, the times we live in, as well as the places where we live and the faith communities that we may belong to or come from. If this were not complex and complicated enough, aspects of our identities, and for academics of working-class backgrounds, our classed selves are interpellated by educational moments that may provide (sometimes) advantages, by luck and chance as well as by serendipity. So social identities are contingent, fluid and always in a process of emergence, matters that are addressed in this set of autoethnographies.

This book, *The Lives of Working Class Academics*, works as an important corrective to the common-sense notion of the academic being middle class. Here this notion is troubled – troubled by a set of arguments that recognises that working as an academic is generally regarded as a middle-class occupation, although things are changing. A report by the Social Mobility Commission (2017) found that while 58% of academics in the survey reported coming from a middle-class family, 14% were from a working-class background. In this diffuse, rich and emotionally authentic set of chapters, the voices of a range of academics speak to their experiences of this voyage from one class into another as well as into a very powerful motor of reproduction – the university. Yet, what of the university? Given its hierarchical and oppressive nature, and the importance of place/space, what role does the type of university, perhaps the subject discipline, as well as the academic positionality of the authors of these beautifully crafted pieces play in being working class in the academy? As Iona Burnell Reilly asks of these working-class academics in the preface to this collection, how have they become who they are in an industry steeped in elitism? How have they navigated their way, and what has the journey been like? Do they continue to identify as working class or have their social positioning and/or identities shifted?

Forewords are necessarily short in length and so they are limited in what they can express. What I can say from having read these chapters is that in their range they go a long way towards capturing the diversity of working-class academics' accounts and are all here in one place – something that has not been addressed for a long time. Some of these narratives privilege gender; others incorporate race/gender into their stories. There are accounts that speak of micro-aggressions and introjected values that attempt to situate being working-class as a negative and demeaning identity, and there are others where being working-class is something shared and valued – an asset to be drawn on for solidarity and comradeship. In much of what passes for work 'on' the working classes, their voices are situated in the margins, their lives written out as if being working-class were somehow a

homogenous experience to be retold by others. This powerful collection gives a lie to this violent act; it also works as a corrective to how we construct the subjectivity of 'the academic' from the written words and lives of working-class academics.

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Preface

The Importance of Autoethnography as a Research Method

Byrne describes autoethnography within his own context as a 'tool with which to understand individual and shared experiences of class in higher education' (2019, p. 133). My intention for this book was to collect stories from academics who identify as having a working class background. These stories would be an account of their lives, their experiences and their journeys into becoming a higher education professional, including an in-depth look at their educative experiences along the lifespan. Rather than writing about working-class academics, I have asked working-class academics to write about themselves. McKenzie, writing about her own background, and experiences of the social class structure, comments that 'Narratives, and storytelling, are important in working-class lives. It is how we explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context' (Mckenzie, 2017, p. 6).

One of the requirements of contributing authors for this book was to position themselves as being from a working-class heritage. Reay points out that 'To own an identity as "working class" is, among many other things, to accept one's social inferiority' (1997, p. 228). Crew explains this point further:

> What working class means to everyone looking in at the working class, and sometimes how working-class people see themselves, is that working class means failure, working class means at the bottom of everything. Working class means not being educated, not well read. It always has these really negative connotations. Everything that is about being at the bottom, not good enough.
>
> (Crew, 2020, p. 24)

Initially, my concern was that, for some, writing about one's social class may be a difficult, even painful, experience. Another concern was that people might feel uncomfortable about revealing themselves and their background. Crew recounts some of the challenges she faced while producing her book, including some uncomfortable conversations: 'Perhaps claiming a working-class identity, from the supposed advantaged financial and educational perspective of an academic, could be seen as pretentious. Or, as someone said to me during the writing up of this research, "wanting the best of both worlds"' (2020, p. 25). Geraldine

Van Bueren, chair of the Alliance of Working Class Academics, poses a different kind of concern[1]: 'In academia, people don't feel able to talk about their backgrounds freely because they think it will negatively affect their career' (cited in Wilby, 2019). Byrne presents a different view when he states 'Working-class people are, by definition, relatively uneducated, which exposes the link between class and academia, and the inherent dissonance in thinking about oneself as a working-class [person]… the academy is not just classist, it is the *source* of classism, and of the very concept of the working-class' (2019, p. 136).

These problematic factors are what make the lives of working-class academics all the more interesting, rich and powerful. How have they become who they are in an industry steeped in elitism? How have they navigated their way, and what has the journey been like? Do they continue to identify as working-class or have their social positioning and/or identities shifted? These questions and more will be addressed and answered through each author's fascinating account of their journey. Ryan and Sackrey comment on what instigated their journey into publication: 'we began to wonder if other upwardly mobile academics had experienced similar feelings of displacement or dissatisfaction, and perhaps more importantly, internalised conflict' (1984, p. 6). Thirty-eight years on and, having undergone my own journey, this very question is now on my lips.

Autoethnography is a fascinating method of research that allows the author to reflect on their own lived reality and explore their personal, professional and cultural experiences (in this case, their journey and experience of becoming an academic). 'Autoethnography in its most simplified definition is the study of the self' (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9). However, unlike autobiography and autofiction, autoethnography is a critical study of oneself, and how we understand our relationships to socio-cultural contexts. Hughes and Pennington comment on autoethnography as 'critical reflexive narrative enquiry, critical reflexive self study, or critical reflexive action research in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation to cultural groups identified by the researcher as similar to the self' (2017, p. 11). Simply put, the researcher is the subject of the study, critically reflecting and interpreting their own life, social background and personal experiences. Autoethnography, as all research methods, is driven by theory; different theoretical and conceptual frameworks can be used to frame and/or underpin the autoethnographer's story. Hughes and Pennington provide guidelines to writing an autoethnography and, among others, state that theories are the basis of the account (2017); they also remind us that using a theoretical framework can serve to 'protect the autoethnographer from accusations of narcissistic navel-gazing' (2017, p. 51).

Reflexivity is central to the process of rigorous autoethnography. Researchers are not free from assumptions and biases, and we all have different ways of interpreting the world. By describing, analysing and understanding their background, the autoethnographic process connects the writer's personal and self-narratives to a wider social, cultural and political context. Each of the authors

[1]The Alliance of Working Class academics is a UK-based organisation that supports faculty and students from diverse working-class backgrounds.

within this book has self-defined as being from a working-class heritage. The writer's social class may not be the only aspect of their lives that they reflect on and analyse; they might also draw on race, ethnicity, gender, religion and the intersections between them, in order to fully explore their experience, journey and development into becoming an academic in higher education (HE). Reflexivity, Hughes and Pennington remind us, is 'a central criterion of autoethnography [and] provides researchers with a forum for expressing their awareness of their integral connection to the research context and thereby their influence on that context' (2017, p. 93).

Lovett and Lovett (2016, p. 147) identify that 'An understanding of class is best achieved when studied in conjunction with other social identities like race and gender'. Although a working-class heritage will underpin the autoethnography of each of the writers, the interlocking sections between class, race and gender may also be relevant, possibly for some authors more than others, and this is because, Avis argues, 'analytically we cannot separate relations of class from those of gender and race, in practice they are intertwined. We are all positioned in relation to our class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and so on' (2009, p. 14). One of the advantages of using autoethnography as the method of research is to reveal and authenticate the power relations, the oppressions, the subjugation and the privilege within and between the stories of people's lives.

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is used to describe the ways in which one oppressive trait is interconnected with another; it is the cross-over between two or more distinct discriminations. When bell hooks (1982) referred to herself as a working-class black woman, she may well have been influenced by Claudia Jones, the American civil rights activist, who used the phrase 'triple oppression' to describe disadvantaged black women (cited in Lynn, 2014). Jones believed that black women's triple oppression, based on race, class and gender, preceded all other forms of oppression. hooks, entering HE in the 1960s, writes about her experiences of triple oppression – racism, sexism and class bias – in the academy. In her book *Ain't I a Woman* (1982), hooks challenges the view that race and gender are two separate phenomena, asserting that the struggle to end racism and sexism are inextricably interlinked. This early form of what we now call 'intersectionality' broadens the lens, identifying multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage, as well as race, class and gender; other factors may include caste, sexuality, religion, disability and physical appearance.

Why, we may ask, is any of this important? Hughes and Pennington (2017) have written about autoethnography as 'critical social research'. They cite Jupp (1993) as defining this as encompassing 'a broad range of social science studies that purposefully challenge existing understandings and foundations of knowledge' (Hughes & Pennington, 2017, p. 17). It is usual for social researchers to pursue topics that are close to their experiences of the social world, and this is certainly true for me. Critical research is the paradigm whereby researchers start with a criticism of the social world, that there is something wrong and needs to be fixed. The criticisms usually involve social inequalities and injustices; 'Critical researchers see the world as being divided and in constant tension, dominated by

the powerful, who oppress the people and use the state and its institutions as tools to achieve their purpose' (Sarantakos, 2005, p. 51).

The critical research paradigm is a step further from interpretivism; not content at interpreting the social world, the critical social researcher aims to change it. Gray asserts that 'The assumptions that lie beneath critical inquiry are that: Ideas are mediated by power relations in society. Certain groups in society are privileged over others and exert an oppressive force on subordinate groups' (2020, p. 30). My objective was to give voice to working-class academics, a space to share their stories, and to situate their lived realities, in order that they can be acknowledged and understood. I do feel that not enough is known and understood about the lives and experiences of working-class academics, many of whom undergo unique and profound experiences. We all live in and experience the social world differently; having an understanding of each other's unique lived realities is not only very interesting but is necessary for the good of humanity, and for a progressive and inclusive society. Byrne notes that 'Autoethnography, writing ourselves into our work, is a way to give voice to marginalized groups and contribute to democratizing academic culture and writing' (2019, p. 146).

The legacy of elitism remains in HE, inequality and prestige have persisted, and with very little history or class culture in the field of HE to identify with, this can, for some working-class academics, make their experiences fraught and difficult. My aim for this book is to share those fraught and difficult experiences, give voice to and authenticate them, and more importantly, challenge the dominant discourses that maintain and perpetuate elitism and exclusion within HE.

Iona Burnell Reilly

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Chapter 1

Navigating the Relational Character of Social Class for Capitalism in the Academy

Alpesh Maisuria

Abstract

This chapter is a Marxist Critical Realist inspired discussion of my interest in, and experiences of, being a working-class academic from Indian/African heritage. I begin my autoethnography by problematising the limits of defining social class from a gradational approach, which is the most common way to make sense of social class in academia and beyond. I argue that neoliberal capitalism organises people into workers and owners of production and without this acknowledgement, discussion of social class in the gradational approach is limited. I then go on to critique the de-centering of social class, for which I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a case study. My intention is to promote the explanatory power of approaching social class as as an organisational relationship, which assimilates racism, in the service of capitalism. Throughout the chapter, I provide examples of the way that I navigate this intellectual standpoint in the classroom, specifically through utilising the concepts of *mystification* and *feasibility* that I developed through my PhD that focussed on social class in Sweden. Without dismissing the value of the gradational approach of understanding social class *in toto*, and also the importance of personal identities (indeed I have focussed on my ethno-racial identity), my basic argument is that without the centralisation of social class, and crucially its articulation with neoliberal capitalism, social class becomes a *descriptive* category rather than *explanatory*, rendering the possibility of radical social change as severely diminished.

Keywords: Social class; social status; Marxism; neoliberalism; critical realism; feasibility; mystification; inequality; inequity; racism

The Lives of Working Class Academics, 1–15

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Preamble

Referencing Ellen Meiksins Wood, Webber (2015) writes that 'There are really only two ways of thinking theoretically about class: either as a structural location or as a social relation'. The point being made is that gradational schemes that try and measure social class position actually measure *status* and socio-cultural *markers*, which may be interesting and useful points of departure, but, he goes on:

> …there is a very long way to travel in order to identify how a class 'in itself' becomes a class 'for itself', to use Marx's terminology for the movement between an objective class situation and class consciousness, or from social being to social consciousness. In order to get there, we need to think of class as a social-historical process and relationship.
>
> (Webber, 2015)

Webber (2015) then cites a pithy comment by E. P. Thompson that '[t]he working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. … It was present at its own making', thus making the point that E. P. Thompson was stating the importance of social class to be understood historically, dialectically, and materially emergent in/through social relationships. In other words, and more directly, social class is entangled in a web of relations that encompasses social relationships that are always conditioned by capitalism. The masses have been purposefully encouraged by the global ruling class to think of ourselves as individual agents acting freely as consumers and rational beings (homo economicus), rather than being socio-economically related *for* capitalism. There is a necessity to have consciousness of this reality, thus in order to create the modicum of possibility to progress to eudemonia – flourishing for all.

These words of preamble provide the sentiment for the three overarching objectives for this chapter: (1) problematise gradational approaches to social class, arguing that a focus on status does not hold explanatory power; (2) critique the de-centering of social class, for which I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a case study; and (3) promote the explanatory power of approaching social class an organisational relationship in the service of capitalism. My basic argument throughout this autoethnography is that without the centralisation of social class, and crucially its articulation with neoliberal capitalism, social class becomes a *descriptive* category rather than *explanatory*, rendering the possibility of radical social change as severely diminished.

Ways of Thinking About Social Class

During my undergraduate, in 1999, I vividly remember a seminar exercise led by my lecturer that involved an opening provocation – *What social class are you?* I had deliberated this question for many years, and so I was able pontificate – 'I'm at university *now*, so I must be middle class'! I was making the association between my educational status and my transient social class positionality. There

were nods of agreement. Others in my classroom recognised social class as both reflecting, as well as causing, economic, social and cultural differences – the term inequality became a trope. These differences were described through differentials in income, wealth, status, education and lifestyle; mortality and health were mentioned too. Many of my fellow students pointed to *income* as the most significant *marker* of social class, and this was discussed as part of expressions of wealth indicated through private possessions. Income and wealth were perceived to denote social class but nobody explicitly discussed social structure, capitalism and social relations beyond superficial socio-cultural markers (e.g. house size/type/location, brand/cost/model of car and so forth). The discussion we were having was not *sui generis*. Education, employment and occupation, and other socio-cultural and consumption markers, are widely often used in this way to make sense of, and measure, social class. These markers are also used to argue that social class is either important (see neo-Weberians), or unimportant (for instance, as compared with ethno-racial identity), or that we live in a post-class society (including those who take up the dubious promotion of Post-Humanism/New Materialism). In that seminar during my undergraduate, we were far from being a class for itself – we did not see the connection we had to each other and the economic system, as is the case in society more generally.

During my teens, this point about contemporary society being post-class was a focus for former Conservative Prime Minister John Major in 1990 through claiming he would propel us into a 'classless society', and then in 1999, and giving ballast to this post-class zeitgeist, Tony Blair claiming 'I want to make you all middle class'. Both Major and Blair were seemingly promising the expansion of the middle segment of the social structure. These promises were framed by the unavoidable need to address social inequality after almost two decades of the aggressive pursuit of neoliberalism with its concomitant market policies, promotion of self-interest and individualisation, with a heavy dose of laissez-faire governance (Maisuria, 2022). This environment commenced with the fundamental political antipathy to working class issues, solidarity, empathy and comradeship. This antipathy was so stridently promulged by Thatcher in her now infamous 1987 statement that clearly placed individuals at the centre of social ills, rather than the government's pursuit of neoliberalism. On society, Thatcher stated:

> There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families and no government can do anything except through people and people look to themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves and then also to help look after our neighbour and life is a reciprocal business …
>
> (Thatcher, 1987)

For Thatcher, even a rhetorical 'pursuit of equality' by the government 'itself is a mirage' (Thatcher, 1975). The notion of a caring and sharing society was being cultivated as an anathema during the 1980s by Thatcher's dominant ideology.

Against this political backdrop that I was living through and learning about via osmosis, there was a shift away from thinking about the role of the State and

its institutions, such as education, and this made common understandings of social class to be about differentiation with socio-cultural markers of status. This is now the most common way that social class is understood by those within and beyond academia. For instance, the titles of the presentations at the 2021 Working Class Studies conference are a strong indication of the diminution of a relational approach to social class – none of the papers had Marx, only five included the word neoliberalism (four were in the same Panel), and one had the word capitalism. This shift in definition can also be seen more widely, including in the design of official/popular class schemas, such as the Registrar General, Goldthorpe and the Great British Class Survey that places people in a grade ranging either five or seven 'classes' – a gradational approach.

Grades of Social Status Versus Social Class as a Capitalist Relation

But by the time I embarked on my third year of university, I came to realise that there were fundamental problems with this gradational way of thinking about social class. At best it is superficial (for instance where does the Royal Family fit? Or the super-rich?), and at worse it absents the objective reality of the world, which is structured by capitalism to satisfy its reliance on social class relations in its system of value production. In Hill and Maisuria (2022), we discuss efficacy of both the *gradational* model and also the *relation* model of understanding social class and its lived reality. While popular class schemas (like the ones mentioned above) and mainstream responses to the question *What social class are you?* elicit responses that refer to social class, they are actually measuring status in *gradational* way of thinking. Thus, we make the point in Hill and Maisuria (2022, p. 627) about grades of social status:

> … they are actually not classes, but rather they are gradational categorisations based on the sociologist Max Weber's theory of status. Importantly they are not articulated as part of a relationship of social groups, so it is unclear how one 'class' relates to another – these gradational schemas hide the essential connective economic relationships between groups. …. in these [neo-Weberian] schemas, people are graded in a hierarchy but they are missing the essential relation, the Capital-Labour Relation.

My co-author for that chapter, Professor Dave Hill, was also my tutor at university more than two-decades ago. In my second year at University, Dave had an enormous impact on the way that I began to understand social class as a relationship in capitalism between two classes – this is what is called the Capital-Labour relation in Marxism. Knowledge of this was a revelation. I grew up in the city of Bradford and wool mills from a bygone era of a distinctive capitalist ruling class were everywhere, some mills were being repurposed, such as for my college education, but many remained derelict. These mills represented a time when the dominant mode of production was visibly *industrial* capitalism.

With Dave's intellectual resource, I began to become conscious of my background and the way that society was organised then, but has now become invisible (see my discussion of mystification below). This social organisation took the form of workers and also those who owned the means of production in capitalism. My interest in social class was piqued by a significant problem with finding out about the way that workers were the ones who produced *value* through their labour to produce things and provide services (commodities), but the fruits of this labour (profit) was disproportionately taken by the those who owned the means of production (proprietors of factories, companies, equipment), this is clearly an *exploitative* relationship. I have come to realise that nobody can escape this organisational structure, and there is a place for everyone and everyone has a place to service capitalism in this epoch of globalisation.

My academic career and teaching have been based on exposing this fundamental truth with capitalism, which is now in its neoliberal form and being augments by technological developments (including, AI and the 4th Industrial Revolution).

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a term that is regularly used by those who are interested in education. For example, Stephen Ball's work on the marketisation of education over many years has been rightfully celebrated, but his work does not adequately make the articulation that neoliberalism is about the essence of the social relations of production. His work is maladroit for showing that the relationship between the workers and the capitalists is exploitative and based on value creation through the production of commodities. If this organisational relationship is not recognised with/through education, then the role and function of education for neoliberalism cannot be fully grasped and status quo will endure.

My research, teaching and general scholarship utilises Marx to have an account of social class that tries to capture objective reality. In the three volumes of *Capital*, Marx and Engels explained that society has an objective reality that is organised by the capitalist mode of production (see Maisuria, 2022). Exempting capitalism and the way that it arranges people into two antagonistic groups in society means that discussions of social class, inequality, inequity, poverty, injustice become *descriptive* rather than *explanatory*. For many years, my teaching has tried to enable students to understand that social class is *more* than merely private possessions, consumption, lifestyle choices and embodied subjectivities, which are the markers of social and positionality success (or lack of). Rather it is about the centrality of the labouring class (my students, me, us!) who get paid for their labour and this is used for survival, today this means paying for food, bills and debt – including tuition fees. The commodity produced by the labour of the worker is sequestered for market-place exchange by the capitalist class for more money than the total cost of production. This means value produced by the worker's labour (the output/service provided) must be greater than the sum total cost of production, including raw materials, buildings and materials, and crucially the wage (Maisuria, 2022). Wage labour, as it is termed in the Marxism, is dehumanising and alienating in neoliberalism. I ask my

students whether their job (all my students work) is satisfying, fulfilling, paid appropriately and makes them feel human. Suffice to say the valuations are rarely positive, and we draw conclusions from this about the status quo.

My teaching practice is framed by a Critical Education approach (see Mathison & Ross, 2022), and the entry point is always to begin with the following pivotal provocations:

What the world is like in your perception? What do you perceive the world to be like for others? How do you think they perceive it? Why do you think in this way?

What would you like the world to be like? What do you think others want the world to be like? Why do you think in this way?

How do we get there? What role can you/do you play for this vision to become feasible? How can you work in solidarity with others? Why do you think in this way?

This approach to navigating issues of social class and capitalism in the classroom is how I characterise Marxist pedagogy and praxis that is based on the reality and experiences of students and their perspectives. At the foundation of this approach is Joyce Canaan's counsel to me that we must work *within* and *against* neoliberalism (see Canaan, 2005; Canaan & Singh, 2013; Asher, Cowden, Housee, & Maisuria, 2022). I have found this idea incredibly profound as a maxim for life as an academic where I am servicing the very problems that I identify by labouring for a neoliberal university. In the words of Canaan:

> Teachers who engaged in a dialogue that focused upon and took seriously students' thoughts, and considered them agents capable of expanding their limited understandings, could empower students to develop active thought, which they could then use to help themselves and other oppressed groups.
>
> (Canaan, 2005, p. 163)

In provoking these questions, my navigation of social class as a topic of dialogue is animated by a material base. For instance, the British government in 2020 provided an excellent teaching opportunity for this when it issued 'guidance' that revealed an insight about how the capitalist ruling class are frightened of the ever-present possibility of revolutionary momentum building. It said: 'schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take … a publicly stated desire to abolish or overthrow democracy, [and] capitalism' (Department for Education, 2020). Using the real-world examples like this to think about social class and associated ideas of democracy in capitalism places the objective reality of world at its centre, rather than circumnavigating it like so much discussion of social class does in the academy. Understanding that, we as, individuals working in collective symphony, organised through Trade Unions, and other ways, can effect the unfolding of history. To demonstrate this, I tell students that people-power forced the Government to remove this overtly ideological repressive diktat from its guidance.

So in the classroom, we progress discussion about the direction that history is travelling – are things getting better for us individually and humanity as a whole? In Maisuria (2022, p. 486), I wrote that:

> Marx foresaw the development of a society under capitalism where the ruling class would gradually become enormously wealthy through the work of the labouring class. In this historical evolution, the profits of those who own the means of production (see any rich list for names – every year this will include: Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, Warren Buffett, Carlos Slim and Bill Gates) will exponentially become greater, while workers' wages will remain stable, decrease, or only marginally increase. The increasingly exploitative relationship between the two classes was described as a continual source of struggle by Marx in the following terms: 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles'
>
> (Marx & Engels, 1848)

The Critical Education-based pedagogy inevitably entails discussions that are filled with indignation, deflation, depression. But nevertheless, these are important discussions about social class, which not only expose social class but also connect it to neoliberal capitalism. Only with this pre-requisite understanding can resistance be mounted for a better existence for us all. The important message that my students take away is that pessimism and nihilism is not an option if change is desired. Only people working in solidarity can make history, but conditions are deliberately made difficult for us because it threatens the capitalist ruling class dominant hegemony (Marx, 1852; see also; Mayo, 2015; Maisuria, 2020).

These existential and material discussions of life and history are designed to lead to *good sense* about who we are in the system that we inhibit (Maisuria, 2020). Bhaskar (2016, p. 173) describes the value of this process for finding unity and developing collective (class) consciousness:

> … the process of basic human interaction, including the swapping of life stories, gets underway, then gradually the move to more difficult topics can begin. However, there may be a surprise here. For it may often transpire that what the other whom we are fighting wants is something very similar to what we want. Thus probably the overwhelming majority of soldiers fighting in the First World War wanted 'bread, peace and land'. Discussion of shared or similar objectives may point the way to the isolation of the real constraints on the attainment of these objectives. … the other is often merely developing a part of oneself that one has chosen not to develop or to see; so that the other is merely showing us a repressed, denied or forgotten part, aspect or possibility of oneself.

The key point is that there is a pulse of freedom when we talk and discuss what the world is like, and what we want, and how we can get there (Bhaskar, 1993).

As part of these stories, with my students, I contribute a brief exchange that I had with my father. Soon after finishing my undergraduate degree in 2002, I decided that I wanted to follow-up on my emerging interest in policy with a Master's degree and do this in London – some three hours away from my birth city, rather than return home. I sought permission from my father, who tersely stated: 'Why'! This is symbolic. My family were immigrants settling in Bradford having arrived from Kenya (with Indian heritage), and 1960s Britain was no place for people like my father to be getting above their station, or encouraging others like him to do so, including his children. Social and education policy was about assimilation – 'leave your funny foreign stuff behind and be more like the British' was the tenor of the moment, and my father had been inculcated into the zeitgeist and this stayed with him throughout his life. The whole system and the culture had been designed to stabilise the status quo through promoting individualism. The working class were actively trained to be the agents of their own oppression. I was living Paul Willis's *Learning to labour: How working-class kids get working class jobs* (Willis, 1979). This story and my wider biography of being the outsider in many different ways (see Maisuria, 2017, pp. 90–93) finds echoes with the experiences of my students. We are all in search of that pulse of freedom (Bhaskar, 1993).

De-Centring Social Class

This chapter has so far dealt with inadequate ways of dealing with social class by those who claim to take social class seriously but use a gradational approach, which I have argued lacks explanatory power. I will now provide some commentary on those approaches that attempt to de-centre class and concomitant problems and the threats that these poses.

Over the last 4 decades, various alternative intellectual and ideological trajectories have emerged to negate the Marxist approach of social class as relational in a capitalist world. Prominent among these, are those that focus on centring either: 'race', gender, sex, religion, disability, democracy, either to exclude social class or de-centre it.[1] I point out to my students that social class is conspicuously missing from the radar of many people, which is problematic because class conditions the way they can access opportunities, and how these opportunities materialise. In other words, there is an absence of consciousness of social class an objective social relation with real consequences. In Hill and Maisuria (2022, p. 625), we point out that:

> … it is therefore striking that in the UK, social class is not a protected characteristic as part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's Equalities Act 2010. Unlike age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex, and sexual orientation, it is legal to discriminate against a person based on their perceived