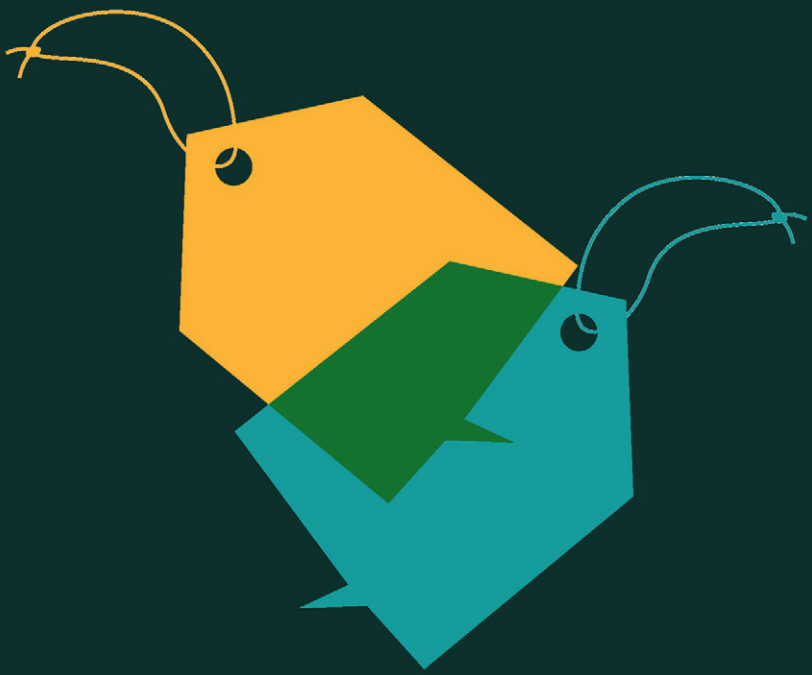

SELLING OUR YOUTH

Graduate Stories of Class, Gender and Work in Challenging Times

Harriet Bradley, Richard Waller and Laura Bentley

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SELLING OUR YOUTH

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Harriet Bradley is Professor Emerita at Bristol and West of England Universities and Fellow of the Academy of Social Science. Her many publications include *Fractured Identities*, *Gender and Power in the Workplace* and *Men's Work, Women's Work*. She has written and researched widely on inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity. The *Paired Peers* project, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, is the latest of many research projects she has headed. The first book jointly authored by the project team, *Higher Education, Social Class and Social Mobility*, was awarded a prize by the Society for Education Studies.

Richard Waller is Professor of Education and Social Justice at the University of the West of England, Bristol, where he has worked since 1995. Richard's research explores the intersection of education, social class and identity, and is driven by a social justice agenda. In addition to the *Paired Peers* project upon which many of his key publications are based, Richard has also recently completed projects on combatting gender-based violence in universities, and a retrospective analysis of the Aim Higher widening participation initiative of the early 2000s. He is currently researching the experiences and motivations of working-class young men in higher education.

Laura Bentley is an ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Social Policy at the University of Birmingham. She is the principal investigator for the project *Still Jenny from the Block? Working-class women, higher education and social mobility in the COVID context*. Previously, Laura has worked on the *Paired Peers* project and the *Revisiting the Needs of Sutton Coldfield: Change and Future Requirements* project. She is a co-convenor of the British Sociological Association's Social Class Study Group and hosts the *Working-class Women's Writing Retreat* for academics and students.

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INTRODUCTION

> *It's a long term investment getting a degree. It's such an important investment for getting a good job that you wouldn't otherwise have, and I think it's pretty essential.*
>
> (University College London student George Phillips, interviewed in 2012) Parr, C. (2012)

The transition from university into stable employment has never been easy. However, in the 1960s, when the oldest of this book's three authors was a student at Bristol University, a steady stream of students from working-class backgrounds who had done well at school passed through the Higher Education (HE) system and entered professional employment, building careers as academics, lawyers, accountants, politicians, in the media and in arts. These 'baby boomers' were able to maintain good careers until retirement when they received solid pensions.

The objective of this book is to show how, in the twenty-first century, the fortunes of HE entrants are increasingly shaped by their class backgrounds. So much has changed since the 1960s. The proportion of young people who enter HE has increased greatly; in 1960 it was just 5%. The New Labour Government in 1997 set a target of 50% participation rate by 2010, which was common across the European Union, of which Britain was then a member. It has

become the normal expectation of children in middle-class families that university will be part of their life journey, and increasingly working-class parents too have aspirations for their sons and daughters to attend university. In a time of economic uncertainty, a degree is seen as a passport to better prospects, as the quotation from George demonstrates. Such aspirations are particularly strong among some of Britain's ethnic minority populations, such as British Asian and Chinese heritage people, who see qualifications as a defence against racial discrimination. In the words of one of the young adults whose stories feature in this book, 'we are a degree generation'. Yet this ambitious cohort of young people is entering HE and the graduate labour market in a time of turmoil and crisis: the world recession of 2008 and the austerity policies that followed; the imposition of crippling fees and student loans to replace the generous free tuition and maintenance grants of the post-war decades; the prevalence of insecure forms of employment; and finally in 2020 a world pandemic caused by coronavirus.

We draw in this book on the stories of young adults who were interviewed for a research project, *Paired Peers*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust. This unique project followed a group of undergraduates at Bristol's two universities from the start of their first year of study for a seven-year period. We started with a sample of 90 and at the end of the seventh year were still in touch with 56. They were interviewed up to 10 times each, so we have a detailed account from each of their experiences as students and as entrants to the labour market. In Chapter 2 of this book, we provide an introduction to our research, the city of Bristol and its two universities.

This book focuses on how the social class background of these students has shaped their experiences, both as students and as graduates. Class, of course, is a highly contested and sensitive issue. Moreover, as our societies have evolved and

economies changed, the nature of class relations has changed, becoming more complex. We will indicate some of these complexities as we tell the stories of our young adult participants, and in Chapter 2 we will explain how we categorized our participants as either middle-class or working-class, based on a mix of factors.

Despite the debates around class, both social scientists and politicians assert that social mobility between classes is currently limited and that HE should provide a solution. Researchers Kate Purcell and Peter Elias, in an important paper on the impact of HE on equal opportunities, ask three questions:

1. Has university expansion enabled working-class students to get better jobs?
2. Has it allowed them to compete equally with middle-class peer students?
3. Does it provide means for those from advantaged backgrounds to succeed, thereby reinforcing the existing class order?

As they put it: 'the answer to the first question may be yes, but the answer to the second is no, and to the third a resounding yes' (Elias & Purcell, 2013, p. 20). As a result, they continue, though the number of students in HE has dramatically increased, the proportion from disadvantaged backgrounds has remained stable over the past 40 years, and they are increasingly having to enter non-graduate jobs when they graduate. This sad picture is confirmed in Diane Reay's wonderful book on education and inequality, *Miseducation* (2017). Reay draws upon decades of research carried out with schools, working-class young people, their parents and with

university students, to show how the whole education system is stacked against working-class people's chances of success.

In Reay's studies, and in our own, use is made of the influential work of French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, especially his arguments that life chances are affected by the possession of, or lack of, certain types of resources or, as he called them, capitals. These are economic capital (possession of wealth, income and financial assets); social capital (access to networks of influential people) and cultural capital (knowledge, both academic and practical, and, particularly, familiarity with highly regarded forms of literature, music and the arts). A degree can itself be seen as educational capital, but to utilize that fully, the other forms of capital are needed: and, in general, middle-class families possess more valuable forms of all of them.

In Chapter 1 we draw on these studies and concepts to set the context for our own research, exploring the nature of contemporary labour markets and the position of graduates within them. We suggest that, as Guy Standing (2011) has argued, students and graduates may be in danger of entering the world of the 'precariat', a category of people defined by an insecure and transitory relationship to the world of work. Many of the *Paired Peers* participants found short-term employment in what is known as the 'gig economy'. Yet we argue that in relative terms it still pays to be a graduate, so Chapter 1 also briefly considers the experience of those young people who lack HE experience and are therefore even more vulnerable to economic insecurity. Recent research has shown that, while some young school leavers may earn better wages than graduates in their starter roles, in a few years' time graduate earnings outstrip non-graduate, what is known as the 'graduate premium' (Blanchflower, 2019).

The next set of Chapters, 3–6, look in detail at the experience of the graduates in our study, drawing on the rich

narratives they offered us to build a picture of the characteristic pathways of four different groups: middle-class men, middle-class women, working-class men and working-class women. We show how their career pathways are strongly shaped by both class and gender, but also tease out some of the complexities of class within these broad groupings.

But, you may ask, does it matter? Are not these differences predictable and unavoidable? Our answer is that it does absolutely matter. All political parties profess concern about lack of social mobility in our society. A report from the Sutton Trust (2019) showed how elite professions are filled with people who went to private schools and thence to prestigious universities. For example, while in 2016 only 7% of the population attended independent schools, 74% of judges, 61% of senior doctors, 71% of top military officers and 51% of journalists were privately educated. Moreover, these top people are disproportionately drawn from Oxford and Cambridge Universities (Oxbridge): 74% of the judiciary, 54% of leading journalists and 47% of the MPs in the Conservative cabinet. Perhaps even more shockingly, in the Labour shadow cabinet, 32% went to Oxbridge: this is the party founded to represent the interests of working-class people. As Owen Jones' book on the elite, *The Establishment; and how they get away with it* (2014), also confirms, these senior people are the decision-makers and law-givers in our society, but have little experience and understanding of the lives and views of ordinary working people. Consequently, they tend to govern in the interests of their own class and reflect its values and morality. Jones' other well-known book, *Chavs* (2011), reveals how increasingly rather than being seen as 'the salt of the earth' as they were in the post-war period, British working-people are despised and looked down on, stereotyped as lazy losers and scroungers; more like, as Jones put it, 'the scum of the earth'. As a highly offensive but not untypical example, in January

2021 a Conservative local party chairman, Dr Gareth Baines, was forced to resign after tweeting that hospital Accident and Emergency departments were 'full of fat mums in pot-noodle-stained leggings/pjs taking their kids for a day out at A&E to harvest Facebook likes, because their darling little snot-covered ASBO fell over' (Mail Online, 10 Jan 2021).

Thus, the final chapter of the book will consider what can be done to contest these patterns of privilege and disadvantage. What policies should be adopted by schools, universities, employers and politicians if we are sincere in wanting to create a more just and equal society? Or are we happy to accept educational and economic conditions which lead, as we shall show, to mental stress and depression in a generation of young people, resigned to 'selling our youth', in the words of one young graduate in our study, in an exploitative and precarious global marketplace?

1

YOUNG GRADUATES' EMPLOYMENT TRAJECTORIES IN CONTEXT

The young women and men whose stories are told in subsequent chapters in this book belong to what is known as 'Generation Y' or 'Gen Y', those who were born between 1981 and 1996. They are also often known as 'millennials' as they grew up around the millennium. Unfortunately for them, they were growing to adulthood when the recession of 2008 struck, with devastating effects on the future economy. Here in the United Kingdom, the Conservative Government led by David Cameron and George Osborne responded to this crisis with austerity policies, drastically cutting back public spending. These policies led to rising unemployment and debt, and in 2011 involved significant increasing of fees for attending a higher education institution (HEI) from £3,290 to a ceiling of £9,000 (Govt. policy briefing document: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05753/SN05753.pdf). Although during the election of 2010 the Liberal Democratic Party, along with the Labour Party, promised to remove fees, when the Lib Dems led by Nick

Clegg entered into coalition with the Conservatives, they reneged on that pledge. As a result the young millennials who entered university faced taking out loans which would leave them with large amounts of debt on graduation.

Because of these impacts of recession and austerity, Generation Y, and their successors, Generation Z, are considered to be the first generations in the modern era who will be worse off than their parents. They have been popularly referred to as *Generation Crunch* (after the so-called credit crunch), *Generation Rent* (because of their inability to purchase accommodation) and *The Lost Generation* (because of the limiting of employment options). Howker and Malik (2013) wrote a useful book about the plight of Gen Y, entitled *Jilted Generation*; they argued that older people's greed was depriving young people of chances to achieve a decent lifestyle. This idea was also developed by former Conservative Higher Education (HE) minister, David Willetts, whose book was provocatively titled *The Pinch: How the baby boomers took their children's future and why they should give it back* (2010). Similar ideas were expressed in the United States by Bruce Cannon Gibney and can be found in a series of YouTube clips. Across Europe the same phenomenon was observed and various labels were given to Gen Y and Gen Z.

This chapter sets the scene, discussing the difficult economic context in which the young adults' stories we will highlight were played out. Then we briefly review previous studies exploring the situation of young graduates: as they are still considered to do better than their contemporaries who have not entered HE, we give some details of the issues non-graduates may face in education and employment. Next we address the thorny and contested issue of how to define social class in contemporary Britain. Finally, since we espouse an intersectional approach to understanding inequalities, we