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THE 21ST CENTURY LADZ

CONTINUITY AND CHANGES AMONG MARGINALISED YOUNG MEN FROM THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

RICHARD GATER

The 21st Century Ladz

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The 21st Century Ladz: Continuity and Changes among Marginalised Young Men from the South Wales Valleys

BY

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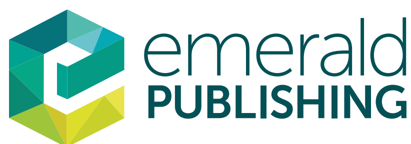

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In Loving Memory of Loki Gater
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Contents

About the Author *xi*

Foreword *xiii*

Acknowledgement *xv*

Introduction *1*

Chapter One The Ladz and the Valley Boy *7*

Chapter Two Working-Class Young Men, Education, and Employment *19*

Chapter Three Critically Exploring Masculinities *35*

Section Header

Chapter Four The Ladz and Education *47*

Chapter Five The Ladz and Employment *69*

Chapter Six The Ladz and Masculinities *97*

Chapter Seven Continuity and Change *115*

References *137*

Index *151*

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About the Author

Richard Gater is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Adult Social Care Research (CARE) at Cardiff University. His research interests lie in masculinities, education, employment, and health and well-being.

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Foreword

It's not something that the academy likes to admit or even necessarily comprehend, but the scholarly treatment of working-class boys and men – and the working class more generally – remains replete with deficit-laden accounts. Implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, working-class boys and men are situated as being the big part of contemporary social ills. Against the grain of this reading, Richard Gater contributes to a budding research literature with an important, compelling and thought-provoking first book. Preconceptions of a lack of ambition, a lack of achievement, a lack of adaptability, and even a *lack of humanity* are absent here in part because the author's own working-class roots provide a lens for understanding that stereotypes of working-class masculinities should be troubled. Instead, this book features an unwavering commitment to uncovering the richness, complexity, and contradictions inherent in the lived experiences of the young men it so carefully studies.

Drawing from immersive ethnographic research in the South Wales Valleys, Gater's nuanced portrait of working-class youth illustrates that there is much to learn *from*, not just about, working-class boys and men. This feels to me especially important given the research site is part of the former industrial heartlands, the kind of place that has often been considered to surface static, unchanged forms of masculinity and a people seemingly stuck in time. However, Gater's vivid opening account – a bewildering moment of observing a group of young men engaged in an unconventional act of camaraderie – captures the essence of this book: a journey into understanding behaviours that both align with and disrupt traditional notions of masculinity. These young men, that Gater describes as the 'Ladz', defy easy categorisation. They embody toughness and risk-taking but also display sensitivity, physical tactility, and gender-egalitarian views. Such a portrayal demands that we rethink what it means to grow up working-class young man in contemporary Britain.

One of the most striking aspects of this book is its refusal to settle for one-dimensional explanations. The 'Ladz' navigate conflicting social expectations, with their interactions with education and employment revealing an ongoing negotiation between inherited cultural practices and the demands of a post-industrial economy. The concept of 'amalgamated masculinities' – introduced here as a fusion of protest masculine traits and softer, more inclusive characteristics – provides a powerful framework for understanding these young men's identities. It is a testament to the book's analytical strength that it captures not only continuity with past generations but also the emergent forms of masculinity shaped by changing

social and economic contexts, and that it does so in a way that avoids a reductive turn to framing social change as only camouflage for persistent (and very real) unequal gendered power relations.

Moreover, this work speaks to broader questions about the future of work and social mobility. The young men's pragmatic attitudes towards education, their partial rejection of traditional manual employment, and their engagement with evolving forms of masculinity all suggest that working-class identities are more adaptable and forward-looking than often assumed. In an era where automation and economic shifts threaten to marginalise low-skilled labour, understanding these adaptations is more important than ever. And, of course, this is not only a story of adaptation but of contemporary working-class struggles and broader class power relations.

What makes this book truly stand out is its personal tone. Gater's reflections on his own working-class upbringing add depth and authenticity. The struggle to reconcile past and present identities mirrors the journeys of the 'Ladz' themselves, making this more than an academic study – it is a story of growth, confusion, and understanding. I am excited for the readers of this book. The voices and the analysis presented in this book will entertain you, will challenge you, and if approached in good faith, will teach you.

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I want to acknowledge many people's contributions in helping me complete this book. First and foremost, I would like to thank the research participants and the host organisation for making this book possible. I hope I have done justice to your stories and captured the complexity of your lives.

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Lastly, I would like to express my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to my family and friends for their continuous encouragement, for listening to my ideas and helping me make sense of them, and for supporting me on my academic journey.

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Introduction

A Bewildered Researcher

It was 2020 on a mild December night in the Aber Valley, a deprived former coal mining community deep in the heart of the South Wales Valleys. I had spent almost three months at a youth centre in this community, which was the base for my ethnographic research and the foundation for this monograph. I had established a good rapport with the staff and many of the young people at this organisation. On this particular night, the youth centre was a hive of activity, and many of the young people were in a boisterous mood. I had positioned myself at the centre's main entrance, where many of the young people often gathered, as it offered them quick and easy access to the outside and the ability to smoke, an activity that many of the young people engaged in. Whilst standing at the entrance, I heard an outpouring of laughter and noise coming from outside. I decided to investigate and find the source of what sounded like enjoyment. However, I was about to witness one of the most bewildering scenes of my time at the youth centre.

As I walked through the entrance door and approached the main road outside, I was greeted by a group of young men chasing each other around a car. The sound of retching filled the air as the young men drew phlegm from the back of their throats and nasal passages and then proceeded to spit it in each other's faces, all the while laughing as they did it. Observing these working-class young men engage in this act and watching nasal mucus drip from their faces as they laughed dumfounded me because, as I document in Chapter One, I was a research insider (Merton, 1972) both concerning the area where the research was situated, which is my place of residency, and I was once a laddish masculine working-class young man (Jackson, 2006; Willis, 1977). Within the culture I grew up in, spitting in another man's face was considered a cowardly and dishonourable deed; it was an act that transgressed the 'man code' (King et al., 2021) and ideas of masculine toughness (McDowell, 2003), courage and respectability.

In line with the centre's operational rules, we had a staff meeting later that night to discuss and debrief the night's events. I was still stunned and puzzled by the spitting episode and decided to discuss it with the staff. I explained to

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Dafydd – the centre manager – my confusion surrounding the young men's behaviour and how it conflicted with the working-class laddish code I adhered to growing up. He responded: '*That category of young men [laddish] doesn't exist anymore. These young men have been changing for the last ten years'*. This statement puzzled me because, as Chapters Four and Five will show, the participants of this research do demonstrate laddish (Jackson, 2006) qualities, which include 'having a laugh', sexism, being cool, hard, risk-taking and interest in activities constructed as masculine (Francis, 1999). However, as Chapter Six illustrates, Dafydd's statement would eventually become partially justified, and this would not be the first or last time that this group of working-class young men who became the focus of my study and whom I would come to term the 'Ladz' would bewilder me and make me question my identity – who I once was and who I had become.

Several concepts in this book originate from my engagement with relevant literature and my undertaking of 120 hours of ethnographic observations at the youth centre. These observations were influenced and are interpreted through reflections on my youthful laddish biography and my confusion from witnessing the Ladz express views and engage in behaviours I once practised, including a disaffected relationship with education and manual employment aspirations, criminal activity, violence, and drug/alcohol use, all of which have become synonymous with working-class and/or protest masculinity and laddish behaviour (Connell, 1995; Jackson, 2006). While also observing the young men demonstrate somewhat contradictory, though not exclusively (see Chapter Three), softer masculine displays, such as physical tactility, sensitivity, gender-egalitarian views and rejection of homophobia (McCormack, 2014; Roberts, 2013).

Based on the Ladz contrasting displays of behaviour that conform and conflict with the historical understanding of marginalised working-class young men, and in conjunction with an exploration of their school-to-work transition that involved semi-structured interviews and the use of visual methods, this book attempts to decipher these behaviours and answer key questions that guided my research. These questions included: to what extent is the young men's masculine identity representative of common laddish understanding, and how is this identity formulated? How do the young men make sense of education, and how is this understanding constructed and influenced? How do the young men understand employment in the context of their biography and changing social and economic circumstances? And what do the young men's masculinities, employment and education findings tell us concerning discussions about the future of work?

When making sense of the young men's behaviours and in response to the research questions, I argue that the continuities and changes in gendered expressions collectively shape the young men's identity and attitudes towards education and employment, and produce what is conceptualised as 'amalgamated masculinities', a fusion of locally constructed protest masculine characteristics and softer masculine attributes adopted through external cultural influence (Gater, 2024). The following sections provide a contextual overview of the literature concerning this publication and outlines the book's structure.

Background

Post-World War II education and employment-related literature often identify the significance of social relations and the inheritance of a masculine identity (Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977) associated with stoicism, risk-taking, toughness and resistance to authority (Connell, 1995; Kimmel et al., 2005). The inheritance of this identity led some working-class young men to reject education and a manual work orientation that supported the expression of this identity (Ashton & Field, 1976; Carter, 1966; Veness, 1962; Willis, 1977) yet also led to monotonous, unrewarding jobs (Beynon, 1973; Goldthorpe et al., 1969a).

However, the "Thatcherite Revolution" (Nayak, 2003a, p. 149) and the UK's subsequent rapid deindustrialisation from the 1970s onwards led to a decline in such work and an increase in service sector employment. Much of the latter consists of low-skilled, poorly-paid jobs, especially for those from working-class backgrounds (Lindsay & McQuaid, 2004; McDowell, 2003; Roberts, 2020). Much service sector employment also requires historically associated 'feminine' attributes, such as customer service, interpersonal communication, and the presentation of self (McDowell, 2003; Warhurst & Nickson, 2020).

Despite all this, post-industrial research continues to recognise the significance of masculinity in the UK, especially among sections of working-class youth in former industrial locales once reliant on coal, steel, and manufacturing. The research often identifies issues around education and employment (see, for example, McDowell, 2003; Nayak, 2003a; Nixon, 2009; Walkerdine & Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015) that often derive from the intergenerational transmission of previously essential ways of being, including community-related attachment and working-class masculinity characteristics (Ivinson, 2014a; Walkerdine & Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015). These features oppose the neoliberalist ideal of individualism (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) and service sector employment requirements of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), and deference and docility, features claimed to be at odds with working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; McDowell, 2003).

Adjacent to these studies, research has documented the changing nature of manhood and male displays of softer expressions of masculinity in the form of hybrid masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) and inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009). It is within the scope of inclusive masculinity that Roberts (2018) offers an additional perspective on working-class young men and employment and suggests that his 'missing middle' participants (working-class young men who have not disengaged from school/employment, yet neither achieved degree-level education or a professional occupation), no longer fully subscribe to traditional norms of masculinity and are instead demonstrating a more inclusive form of masculinity that is more in tune with the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) requirements of service sector work.

Roberts (2018) and, more recently, Brozsely and Nixon (2022) make important contributions to working-class studies through the focus on the missing middle or ordinary kids (Brown, 1987). However, this book provides a contemporary accompaniment to place-based comparable studies of class and social change in

post-industrial locales (McDowell, 2003; Nayak, 2003a; Walkerdine & Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015) and returns the focus to marginalised working-class young men. This focus is needed because, firstly, 'masculinities are configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold, and change through time' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 852). Secondly, because of surrounding claims regarding changes in social class distinctions (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Savage et al., 2015) and working-class identity (Ainsley, 2018). Thirdly, research on future employment changes suggests that young men with low educational attainment and manual forms of employment will be negatively affected (Frey & Osborne, 2013; Hawksworth et al., 2018; McKinsey Global Institute, 2017). Furthermore, the UK government policy response to future employment changes – increased automation and new technologies – often include upskilling and lifelong learning (Bell et al., 2017; Brown et al., 2020; HM Government, 2021; Leopold et al., 2018; Schlogl et al., 2021; Wheelahan et al., 2022). Subsequently, based on the current understanding of marginalised working-class young men and the associated negative and complex relationship with education and employment, the success of this policy response is questionable.

This book offers a valuable contribution to working-class studies by reversing the recent school-to-work participant shift (Brozsely & Nixon, 2022; Roberts, 2018), refocusing on a group of marginalised working-class young men in the context of the 1977 research on the lads conducted by Paul Willis (1977), whilst also considering relevant contemporary studies. I argue that the young men from this study share some similarities with the lads from Willis (1977) study and with other research concerning marginalised working-class young men, education and employment, including the intergenerational transmission of previously essential ways of being, a complex relationship with education and manual employment orientation (Ashton & Field, 1976; Carter, 1966; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; McDowell, 2003; Nayak, 2003a; Nixon, 2009; Veness, 1962; Walkerdine & Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977). However, there is also evidence of inconsistencies and a change and departure from traditionally associated values of working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995). This includes the young men's struggles with learning disabilities and/or mental health, which contributes to a pragmatic approach to education as opposed to anti-learning (Jackson, 2006; 2010; Willis, 1977), softer displays of masculinity (Anderson, 2009) and some deviation from manual employment orientation that was often the consequence of specific social circumstances. Within the latter, I refer to a rupturing process that destabilised modes of being associated with heavy industry (Ivinson, 2014b; Walkerdine & Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015). The differences in the young men's attitudes and behaviour are significant, especially in the context of future employment changes and the notion that manual employment, low-skilled and poorly educated young men will be negatively affected by increased automation and new technologies. The changes in attitude and behaviour allow us to think about how we could harness and develop them through targeted intervention and a locally-based initiative delivered by trusted community members and organisations to increase educational engagement and consider employment futures other than low-skilled

manual employment and increase the life chances of marginalised working-class young men.

Structure of the Book

This book covers several aspects, including social class and masculinities, future employment changes, and current knowledge concerning working-class young men, education, and employment. This collection of components and their complexity requires a discussion of several works of literature. For this reason, the literature review consists of two chapters. The chapter structure includes:

Chapter One introduces the Ladz, offering some personal insight into the young men and demonstrating their laddish association. It also discusses myself, the Valley Boy, and my researcher positionality.

Chapter Two reviews significant literature and the trajectory of ideas concerning working-class young men, education, and employment and identifies commonalities and disparities along with a research knowledge gap. The chapter also discusses future of work changes and social class.

Chapter Three critically assesses the literature and theories on masculinities, highlighting shortcomings in these ideas regarding related aspects of this book and identifying missing issues.

Chapter Four empirically explores the young men's educational experiences, demonstrating similarities and dissimilarities between the lads from Willis's study and contemporary studies on marginalised working-class young men.

Chapter Five empirically explores the young men's employment orientation and reasoning, identifying commonalities with the lads through some attraction to manual work and highlighting a deviation from this career aspiration.

Chapter Six presents and discusses empirical findings relating to the young men's social relations and masculinities, demonstrating views and behaviours that contradict working-class and/or protest masculinity-associated characteristics.

Chapter Seven discusses the main findings from this book, incorporating theoretical and empirical literature from previous research whilst also suggesting policy approaches. The chapter concludes with some final thoughts.

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Chapter One

The Ladz and the Valley Boy

Introduction

The first section of this chapter introduces the Ladz and offers some personal insight into the young men while discussing their laddish association (Jackson, 2006). The following three sections then explore my researcher positionality. Given the collaborative and qualitative nature of the study and the crucial intimate role that a researcher plays in collecting, selecting, and interpreting data (Finlay, 2002), it is important that I document and consider my own positionality on the research (Unluer, 2012) which included an insider status (Kanuha, 2000), outsider status (Bridges, 2001), and overt full membership (Bryman, 2016). As the chapter demonstrates, these positions were both advantageous and disadvantageous and evoked a personal emotional response. However, collectively, these three forms of researcher positionality have arguably helped contribute to a rich 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973, p. 7) while also influencing my ethnographic lens.

Introducing the Ladz

The Ladz were a group of marginalised working-class young men aged 12–21 that my research predominantly focused on alongside interviews with three youth workers and a schoolteacher. These young men became the focus of my study through 120 hours of ethnographic data collection and subsequent interaction that enabled me to build a good rapport and trusting relationship with them. Based on trust and rapport, I adopted a purposeful sampling technique (Patton, 2002) and recruited participants that would 'yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given [the] topic of study' (Yin, 2015, p. 93). Owing to the impact and curtailing effect of COVID-19, the research predominantly became a case study (Yin, 2012) of nine young men, which I gave individual pseudo names: Stan (age 13), Tommy (age 14), Dan (age 16), Craig (age 12), Lewis (age 18), Billy (age 15),

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Ian (age 17), Cole (age 20) and Wesley (age 17). This group of young men were relatively representative of young men who frequented the youth centre at the time of the research. All of the Ladz gave verbal and written consent to their involvement in the research, with those under sixteen also supplying parental or guardian consent, and the Cardiff University ethics committee provided ethical approval for the study.

Stan

Stan typified laddish culture (Jackson, 2006), displaying hostility towards authority, volatility, and often engaged in racist, misogynistic, and homophobic discourse (McRobbie, 1991; Skeggs, 1992; Walker, 1985). Despite his youthful age, Stan had already gained notoriety in the community and was banned from two local organisations for vandalism and destruction. Furthermore, community shop owners often had to call the police on him due to his intimidating, antisocial behaviour. Stan's run-ins with the law meant that almost all local police officers could personally identify him. He seemed to take great delight in this police notoriety. For example, on one of the many occasions that the police visited the youth centre – often merely on liaison visits – Stan confronted a police officer and said: '*Do you know me?*'. The police officer replied: '*No, should I?*'. Stan responded: '*I'm Stan Jones. You're obviously new*'. Stan clearly thrived on the infamous status and seemed disappointed that the police officer failed to recognise him and acknowledge his reputation.

Tommy

Tommy was the first participant with whom I established a rapport. Tommy and Stan were relatively close friends, and both displayed similar protest and/or hegemonic masculine values, including courage, toughness, stoicism and risk-taking (Cheng, 1999; McDowell, 2003). Although Tommy demonstrated hyper-masculine behaviour (Mac an Ghaill, 1994), it seemed milder compared to Stan's. He presented a 'cheeky chappie' persona with a confident, masculine swagger and bounce in his step. Akin to Stan, Tommy had a negative reputation in the community and had been involved in criminal activity. However, unlike Stan, when questioned and speaking about his misdemeanours, Tommy often presented the idea of victimhood as opposed to Stan's boastfulness. He often claimed that the problems he got into were usually not entirely his fault and were either accidental or the result of peer pressure.

Dan

Dan was not a regular user of the youth centre and only appeared on sporadic occasions. However, my relationship with Dan extended beyond the centre; I knew him through our involvement in the local rugby club as I had trained the youth team. Therefore, there was already an established relationship between Dan and me, and I decided to capitalise on this connection as I felt it would be helpful during