

A Note on Class, Dispositions and Radical Politics

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Abstract

This paper has set itself a number of tasks. The starting point is with Smyth and Simmons' discussion of the affective dispositions of the working class. Rather than exploring the dispositions of members of the working class, the paper examines the attribution of these, not only to the working class but also to other groups. Research addressing the capitalist division of labour in the early years of the twenty's century has illustrated the arbitrariness of this process. This leads into a discussion of the attribution of dispositions and the salience not only of the corporate gaze, but also the white gaze as well as those related to the class, age, race and gender. Research that has addressed aesthetic labour has often attributed 'looking good' and 'sounding right' to people who are assumed to be middle class, the consequence is that an understanding of class as a relation to capital is underplayed as is the resulting politics. A homogenised view of the working class is debilitating and leads to a restrictive understanding of class. Such a stance ignores the re-composition of class relations and the potential for alliances that include members of this putative middle class. An engagement with the affective dispositions of the working class may serve to construct an image of a homogeneous potentially radical class, yet at the same time it serves to exclude constituencies that could play an important role in the

struggle for a just society. Such a struggle would presage alliances in the pursuit of a socially just society.

All Discourse is Dangerous

Foucault reminds us, “that nothing is innocent, and everything is dangerous” (1983, p. 343). Popkewitz (2014) echoes these sentiments in his discussion of the double gestures of inclusion and exclusion. That is to say, his recognition of the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, whereby inclusive practices, at one and the same time, exclude constituting their other. The fear then is that apparently progressive practices become their other. More precisely, he writes

The liberal hope of school research is to produce an inclusive society. This hope is embodied in making children as particular kinds of people, sometimes called problem-solvers and lifelong learners for that future society. But for all these good intentions, the hope of future inscribes double gestures in reform-oriented research. The hope for making kinds of people embodies fears about the dangers and dangerous populations that threaten that desired future. (Popkewitz 2018, 11)

At the risk of inverting and distorting Popkewitz’s argument I am giving it a rather different orientation, constituting capital and the middle class as dangerous. For at least some of those on the left, the danger lies not with the working class but rather with the middle class and their entanglement with capitalist interests.

The spur to writing this paper derived from a reading of Smyth and Simmons’ (2018) introduction to their edited collection *Education and Working-Class Youth*. In this introductory chapter they drew our attention to what they describe as an “ensemble of affective working-class dispositions” (Smyth and Simmon, 2018, p. 7-12), which was followed by a section entitled *An Affective Geography of Working-Class Schooling*ⁱ. On reading these sections, I found

myself thinking about the manner in which class, class images, class perspectives and disposition were constructed and the salience of these to the development of anti-capitalist, as well as radical educational and political practices. The key concern here is to think about the articulation of these features to opportunity structures and the labour market; in other words, to the capitalist division of labour.

The affective dispositions of the working class are rooted within the lived experiences, as well as the structural location of this class. What is significant about Smyth and Simmons' argument is that they invert and offer a corrective to deficit models drawing out and celebrating particular dispositional features of the class. At the same time, they constitute the middle class as the other to these affective dispositions. In Table 1 below, I contrast their constructions of working-class disposition with that of their description of middle-class norms.

Affective Working-Class Dispositions	Middle Class Norms
Honesty	
Directness	Rule following, compliance – deference to authority
Authenticity	
Dignity	
Having a practical philosophy	Abstraction above practicality
A tendency to self-blame	
Placeness or attachment to immediate locality	
Immediacy	Delayed or deferred gratification, orientation towards the future
Solidarity or community	Competitive individualism
A sense of the public sphere	
Innovativeness	

Table 1: Derived from Smyth and Simmons, 2018, pp. 7-12; 4

Undoubtedly, and as Smyth and Simmons are well aware, such dispositional orientations are well established in the sociological literature upon which they draw. This is particularly the case with conceptualisations of the school as replete with middle class norms; a site of middle-class hegemony. However, these descriptions of norms and dispositions reminded me of the affluent worker studiesⁱⁱ of the 1960s and the manner in which the orientations of the working and middle class were described. But in this instance, the traditional working class was compared with a ‘new’ working class who held a money model of society as well as against the middle class with its prestige model.

Traditional Working class	‘New’ Working class	Middle class
Power Model	Money Model	Prestige Model
Us and Them	Privatised	Hierarchical
Closed Society	Family Centred	Open Society
Fatalism	Socially Aspirant	Meritocracy
Collectivist	Instrumental Collectivism	Individualist

Table 2: Derived from Golthorpe and Lockwood, 1963

The importance of these studies is that like Smyth and Simmons such class-based orientations were embedded in the social structure as well as lived experience. However, for Golthorpe and colleagues these orientations served as ideal types, and in this sense were fictional constructions, which were at one removed from the orientations of any particular person or collectivity.

For Smyth and Simmons far, greater weight is attached to their working-class affective dispositions, which perhaps, we could think of as a particular class cultural formation. These stand as a sort of clarion call for a radical politics,

which heralds a politics of hope (Halpin, 2003) or could be one offering resources of hope (Williams, 1989).

There are two issues that flow from the discussion thus far. The first returns to Foucault's claim that, "everything is dangerous" (1983, p. 343) and Popkewitz's (2014) double gestures of inclusion and exclusion. An anti-capitalist politics that derives from a particular construction of affective dispositions is necessarily flawed, reflecting as it does an essentialised and reductive conceptualisation of class.

Whilst Goldthorpe et al. conceptualisation of the 'new' working class was in many respects flawed, it did serve to historicise this and sought to understand its structural context. Smyth and Simmons appear to be mobilising a particular engagement with class that carries with it patterns of inclusion and exclusion. These are rooted within specific classed and cultural experiences. These 'authentic' experiences seem to resonate with a particular imagery of the English Northern working class, one that experienced the collapse of manufacturing, mining and the steel industry in the 1980s, but whose lived experience continues to reprise and be haunted by the past (Gordon, 2008)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Because of the celebration of a particular class cultural formation the result is to exclude those who do not meet these exacting standards. The problem with any list of affective dispositions is that it is selective; how should we view constructions that stress the local, the territorial and the defence of geographic space against those who are considered outsiders, whether this be in terms of ethnicity, religion and so on? Is it possible to envisage a conservative or nationalist construction of affective dispositions? Perhaps more importantly if we conceptualise class in terms of a relation to capital in all its complexity, a

rather different analysis would be developed that would offer a more inclusive model of class. I will return to this issue in due course.

Secondly, a rather different way of thinking about ‘affective dispositions’ is to conceive these as an attempt to construct a particular type of person or to attribute specific dispositional traits to members of the working class. There is not much new in the preceding: much of the sociological literature has attributed particular traits or characteristics to the working class. For example, the Education group (1981, pp. 78-9) commented that in the 1960s a sociological truism was the association of delinquency and educational failure with working class culture. This was explicitly expressed by Vaizey.

[improving the schooling of working-class children] would undoubtedly be the most effective way of eliminating the social problems of the so-called delinquent areas, a name that masks a much wider social problem – the failure to integrate the unskilled and semi-skilled working class into a society which is becoming predominantly governed by the values and standards of the professional middle class. (Vaizey, 1962, p. 24)

The point is that specific dispositional traits were attached to particular types of people. Much the same can be said about race. This connection is very important as it raises questions about the manner in which dispositions are attributed to particular people. What happens if we consider class in the same way as we analyse the dispositional attributions to race and ethnicity?

For Leonardo (2005), race is “‘unreal’” in that it is an incoherent scientific category but nevertheless whose effects are real (c.f. Avis, et al., 2018). For example, Gillborn (1995) has discussed the manner in which teachers associate particular dispositions with Black students - the myth of African Caribbean (male) challenge to authority being a specific example (p. 47; pp. 183-4). The

point is that particular dispositional features were ‘arbitrarily’ attached to specific categories, but these which they carry ‘real’ material consequences. The manner in which these processes are played out in opportunity structures, labour markets and the capitalist division of labour illustrates the materiality of these processes as well as the way in which arbitrary fictions become concretised. The point is the attachment of dispositions to particular categories such as class and race is inherently problematic and dangerous regardless of its political origins. It is because of this that the discussion of race and its relation to the capitalist division of labour is so important, as it serves to alert us to the arbitrariness of the processes involved, as well as their material consequences. It reminds us and emphasises that dispositions are fictionalised constructions which have real material effects.

In the following, I draw on the arguments of Avis et al. (2018), who discuss the capitalist division of labour and the arbitrary construction of the dispositions of workers. Research that has addressed the labour process in the US and the transition from Taylorism to Fordism, has illustrated the manner in which race was central to such processes rather than being some sort of atavistic hangover from the past (Roediger and Esch, 2017, pp. 143-155; Doray, 1988).

Doray refers to a ‘‘rational madness’’ which in part has been reflected in Fordism, but also in a racialised division of labour. Different racialised groups were deemed to have particular dispositions that aligned with specific types of labour. The difficulty faced by theorists at the time they proposed such arguments, is that they could not agree on any particular racialised hierarchy, or indeed who was to be included. Different groups such as the Irish, Jews, Slavs, Swedes, black and white Americans were racialised and compared against one another in terms of their capacity to perform various types of manual labour (Roediger and Esch, 2017). Not dissimilar processes were present in Europe.

We need only consider the manner in which the UK and France drew on labour from their former colonies, with Germany utilising Turkish guest workers (Castle and Kosack, 1973). Goulbourne and Solomos (2003) commenting on the 1970s/80s, citing Ward and Jenkins (1984), remark, how at that time the participation of ethnic minorities in the labour market and wider society was thought to be shaped by dispositional values. They note,

[...] there are two strong models of participation of minority ethnic communities in British society: the Jewish (represented as being socially, economically, politically successful, and well integrated into the upper echelons of society) and the Irish (generally represented as being less successful and mainly outside the mainstream of British society). Subsequent groups [...] followed this dual pattern. (Goulbourne and Solomos, 2003, p. 333)

Model minorities, such as Indian Asians were assumed to have followed the Jewish model, whereas African-Caribbeans were aligned with the Irish model, being firmly placed within a racialised working class. There are a number of consequences that flow from this form of racialisation. Key amongst them is the positioning of African-Caribbeans within the working class, which is reflective of the essentialism of earlier historical accounts.

Whilst Ward and Jenkins (1984) were writing in the 1980s and Goulbourne and Solomos (2003) refer to analyses drawn from the 1970s/80s, Wallace's (2018) more contemporary ethnography provides examples of school teachers unthinkingly associating blackness with underachievement, which echoes Gillborn's argument. But what was also significant was that for those black students who were achieving and who 'challenge[d] or exceed their [teachers'] expectations, it's like they can't even recognise us [as black]' (Wallace, 2018, p. 474).

The point I am trying to make is that fictionalised dispositional orientations are placed upon racialised, and one might add classed and gendered groups.

Intersectional analyses remind us that we are never simply classed, but we are also raced and gendered. The important point is that these dispositions attached to particular classes and raced groups of workers are fictions - but which, to reiterate, have very real material consequences.

The work of Roediger and Esch (2017, p. 145) serve to illustrate the point that racialised and ethnicised characterisations swirled around in contradictory fashion to workers differently located in the capitalist division of labour. How then should we think about the affective dispositions of the working class and can we conceive of such a thing other than as a rhetorical gambit? Once we introduce the construction of racialised and ethnicised disposition in the formation of the capitalist division of labour this raises the question about the manner in which these are embodied. This in turn leads me to think about the relation of these processes to those that bear upon conceptualisations of age and gender, alongside those of race and class and their embodiment.

There is a significant literature that has addressed the aestheticisation of labour in various forms of interactive service work, ranging from the call centre, catwalk to shop work. Much of the research that addresses interactive service work locates this in low waged and precarious employment, such as retail. McDowell (2014, 36) drawing on her work with working class youth in Australia and UK suggests that for at least some young men interactive service work is seen as demeaning and an affront to their masculinity.

Casualised service work was viewed as women's work but even if they 'deigned' to be considered for such work McDowell suggests that their demeanour would deter possible employers (2014, 37). That is to say their

clothing, physical appearance, piercing and tattoos, language and attitude would put-off a potential employer. She suggests

Employers read the surface signals of bodily demeanour, dress and language as indicators of the underlying qualities they are seeking, or more typically as characteristics they are careful to avoid. (McDowell, 2014, p. 37)

There are several points to be made. These young men's performance of their masculinity and style could be read as reflecting their underlying dispositions and therefore suitability for public facing service work. Certainly, this could be the case. Yet there is a literature that discusses working class young people's commitment to waged labour, albeit precarious, low waged and frequently of short duration, whereby they churn between period of unemployment and employment (Shildrick, et al., 2012). This is also set alongside the employment of the middle class, frequently middle-class students, in customer facing service work who are thought to have the underlying qualities or dispositions required in such labour (Nickson et al, 2003) – “looking good” and “sounding right” (Timmins, 2017, p. 424). In the same line, Quach et al. (2017, p. 36) refer to “white, middle-class students who are thought to possess the desired soft skills [that are] ‘cool’, ‘desirable’ or ‘fashionable’”.

Middle class young people are deemed to possess the embodied capacities and attributes required in customer facing service work that working-class young people are believed to lack and that serves to exclude them from such labour (Sheane, 2011). There is a class fallacy here, to which I will return, but first it is important to acknowledge that “looking good” and “sounding right” are socially situated categorisations. We need only to think of the distinction between the performance required by customer facing staff in a tool hire outlet with that of a hipster clothing shop.

Mears (2014) is keen to denaturalise notions of beauty and by default what constitutes “looking good” and “sounding right”. Many of those writers who have addressed aesthetic labour draw on Hochschild’s (1983) discussion of emotional labour who illustrated its inauthenticity and alienating consequences. In addition, this discussion frequently mobilises Bourdieu’s conceptualisations of embodied capital as a dimension of cultural capital that carries with it exchange value (1984, p. 91; c.f. Mears, 2014; Barber, 2016). For both Bourdieu and Hochschild there is a relationship to identity and cultural dispositions. Here again we meet an argument that articulates the performance of aesthetic labour to identity.

Particular forms of emotional or aesthetic labour may be experienced as demeaning and therefore a threat to identity, or alternatively, may align with the individual’s embodied capital and related dispositions. The stance I am taking in his paper is to focus upon the attribution of dispositions rather than their embodiment in the construction of a relatively fixed identity. Alongside the work of Hochschild and Bourdieu sits Goffman (1973) with his dramaturgical approach. He draws our attention to the performance of “situated roles”, as well as to front and back regions, for instance the shop floor contrasted with the stock room. In the front region on the shop floor in high end retail outlets the aesthetic worker may present themselves as middle class, or cool or indeed as a style icon. The point is that aesthetic workers may buy into the image they present, whilst others may construe it as a performance.

In addition, the performance of situated roles implies that identity and allied constructions of the self are mutable and rather more fluid than other accounts would suggest. There is a sort of semiotics here. Wissinger (2011) in her discussion of Black models and “skin tone” draws on Pierce’s argument that

[a sign's meaning] is constructed more by the 'crusted cake of custom' (Pierce, 1958, p. 92 cited in Wissinger, 2011) than by any intrinsic quality of the object itself. (Wissinger, 2011, p. 127).

In other words, there may not be a direct correspondence between the quality of the object and the meanings attributed to it by the 'viewer'. What the discussion of race, and we could add ethnicity, age and gender and their embodiment, contribute is that they alert us to fictionalised construction of dispositions, whilst simultaneously acknowledging their 'real' material consequences. This points towards the manner in which those with power define the other and attribute particular dispositions. Karlsson (2011, p. 59) referring to Wissinger's (2011) discussion of black models draws our attention to the way in which they are not only subject to the corporate gaze, as are other aesthetic labourers, but are also subject to the white gaze. The analogy could be extended to include not only the corporate and white gaze, but also those related to race, class, gender, age and so on.

Thus far, I have sought to problematise an essentialist reading of disposition and by default class, by this I have in mind the attribution of a holistic set of dispositions to the other. This is not to gainsay a Bourdieusian analysis that draws our attention to the relationship between field, habitus and cultural capital or using a rather different language the relationship between structure, lived experience and cultural formation. Such analyses will often point to a distinction between the working and middle class, with the latter formulation being a gloss for a dominant, hegemonic and elite formation - the upper or ruling class. However, this dichotomy between the working and middle class is misleading for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it adopts an expansive notion of the middle class ranging as it does from those in low level administrative work through to those who control the means of production. It is important to think of class in relational terms, that is to say its relation to capital. Many of those in nominally middle-class positions have rather more in common with the working class than to those who control the means of production. Clearly, those analyses that mobilise a gradient notion of class will acknowledge a range of occupational positions in the working class, middle class and beyond. Such a standpoint echoes a neo-Weberian understanding of class groupings with their struggle for positional advantage, whereby different occupational and class groupings seek to enhance their social standing and life chances. This results in a constant jockeying for advantage, with sections of the middle class seeking to mobilise education as a means of securing their position in society. However, such struggles are set on a particular capitalist terrain and have rather more to do with securing the interests of capital than the contending interests of a working and middle class.

Ainley (2016) has suggested we should re-think the manner in which we understand class structure. His argument sits alongside those writers who draw our attention to particular features of the socio-economic context in which there is a polarisation of income and wealth, the hollowing out of the middle class, and a winner takes all society. Phil Brown (2013), refers to this type of society as a “performocracy” characterised by individualisation, the spectre of individual failure and competitive labour markets in which only a few can ‘win’ (p. 68). Ainley, (2016) describes a pear-shaped class structure in which there is a significant insecure “middle working/working middle class” below which there is a section of the “unskilled unrespectable traditional working class” (p. 60). The point is that there has been a re-composition of the class structure.

Many young people will be hard pressed to remain in the same class position as their parent and will face the prospect of downward mobility, even though a significant number are better qualified than their parents (Ainley, 2016, p. 60). In some respect such arguments echo those of the affluent worker studies which argued for a convergence between sections of the middle and working class (Devine, 1992, p.19; p. 24). However, if we conceive of class as a relation to capital such divisions and convergences partly evaporate with both the middle and working class having to sell their labour power, whatever their normative differences maybe. In this sense they could be thought of as fractions of the working class whose interests are in opposition to those of capital. Whilst it may be politically expedient to draw attention to the affective dispositions of the working class, at the same time such an analysis suggests a clear-cut division between the working and middle class which overstates this dichotomy, the blurring of boundaries and the re-composition of class relations in current conditions (Avis, 2018).

Perhaps the issue is not one of the material interests of a class but rather its cultural formation and with this, notions of inclusion and exclusion. This would serve to explain the difficulty I have in avoiding the terms working and middle class. Paradoxically, “performocracy” carries with it the potential for alliances across the cultural formations of class. The collapse of what Ed Miliband (former leader of the British Labour Party) described as the British promise - that the next generation would do better than its predecessor, having a higher standard of living (Ainley, 2016, p. 54; Avis, 2016, p. 30).

The material interests across class cultural formations presage a politics of hope in the struggle for a socially just society. However, such a politics does raise the question as to where the blurring of interests between sections of the middle class and capital lie. In this instance Olin-Wright’s (2015) notion of

contradictory class locations may be of value but it veers towards a neo-Weberian stance. However, it can also point towards cultural locations where the interests of the managerial middle class and those of capital align.

There is another paradox that concerns the affective dispositions of the class and an affinity between elements of this cultural formation with those of the professional middle class, and in particular those working in the public sector. The affinity is reflected in the interest in service, altruism and collegiality. However, it is important not to forget the contradictions and tension surrounding the constructions of professionalism, though much the same could be said about the affective disposition of the class (Avis and Orr, 2014; Avis, Fisher and Ollin, 2019).

There is one final issue I want to raise about class which concerns both working- and middle-class students and the prevalence of low waged precarious jobs in retailing. The increasing costs associated with studying (particularly in England) means that for many students alongside their studies they need to earn. In much of the research on aesthetic labour, there is a tendency to associate middle class workers with high-end retailing as they are thought to possess the cultural capital and soft skills required in such jobs. This is not only a tautology, but such an attribution may well be incorrect.

By way of conclusion

Research that has addressed aesthetic labour has often attributed “looking good” and “sounding right” to people who are assumed to be middle class. The result is that an understanding of class as a relation to capital is underplayed as is the resulting politics. A simplified and homogenised view of the working class is debilitating and leads to a restrictive understanding of class. Such a

stance ignores the re-composition of class relations and the potential for alliances that includes members of this putative middle class.

If we veer towards a homogenised understanding of the cultural formation of the working class, setting this against a middle-class formation - this can be politically debilitating in that it ignores the manner in which both share the same relation to capital. It also ignores the dominant class whatever terms we use to describe this, such as the ruling or upper class. I started this paper with a quote from Foucault (1983), “that nothing is innocent, and everything is dangerous” to which he adds,

[...] my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. (Foucault, 1983, p. 343)

An engagement with the affective dispositions of the working class may serve to construct an image of a homogeneous class, yet at the same time it serves to exclude constituencies that could play an important role in the struggle for a just society.

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ⁱ Smyth and Simmons' discussion of an affective geography of working-class schooling, is of a different order to their examination of affective working-class dispositions. In the former they usefully draw our attention to a number of features that could contribute towards a socially just society and education system.

ⁱⁱ The affluent worker study 1961-1962 was conducted in Luton and explored the identities and perspectives of workers in three companies including Vauxhall cars. The orientations of these more affluent workers were contrasted with those of the traditional working and middle class (ESRC, undated). The affluent worker studies were disseminated in 3 volumes (Goldthorpe, et al., 1968a; b, 1969).

ⁱⁱⁱ I am well aware that the authors draw on a range of writers that extend well beyond the North of England.