No Class here! The Disavowal of Social Class

by

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Abstract

This paper explores how social class is disavowed in contemporary Australian scholarly research. By paying particular attention to research in the field of education in Australia this paper will outline the salience of social class. Using recent theoretical interventions into class theory (Skeggs:2004, Sayer:2005) it will be argued that cultural, moral and subjective renderings of class enable critical research of education.

Class today, according to Skeggs (2004) is made through practices of inscription, exchange, a politics of value and through the production of perspectives. Sayer (2005) maintains that class is indeed a moral issue that operates at a ‘lay normative’ level as well as at an abstracted academic level. Both Skeggs and Sayer reinvigorate the debates about the usefulness of class in twenty first century sociology.

Australia imagines itself as a ‘fair go’ society that provides schooling opportunities for all. What schooling participation and educational achievement in Australia reveals is that opportunities are skewed to maintain and repeat patterns of privilege and disadvantage.

Keywords: class, education, schooling, culture, stratification

Introduction

The ‘everywhere–nowhere’ discourse of class as theorised by Savage (2005) is pertinent to twenty first century Australia and is especially visible in the area of education. From primary school right through to learning in tertiary education, class is ubiquitous. Questions such as what school you go to, where it is, and whether it is public or private? point to the surfaces and depths of class that is both alluded to and disavowed in such questioning. Yet the shaping of education at a policy level and at the micro level for students in schools, TAFE colleges and at University operate with and through a disavowal of the centrality of class and its impacts on participation. Meritocracy overshadows class implications of participation and success in education. Class as a critical category, as a knowledge field associated with theories of class formation are scarcely utilised in scholarly or policy frames for understanding and
explaining contemporary Australian education experiences. This is indeed perplexing given the abundant evidence that not everyone comes to education equally or indeed leaves it with comparably equitable dividends. The distribution of these dividends or prizes depends on the contingency of experience. Why this disavowal of class exists in spite of blatant educational inequalities is the focus of this paper. I engage contemporary conceptions of class to suggest that schooling in Australia might be more productively apprehended as a space that is inscribed by class that reciprocally inscribes and reinscribes class onto bodies.

This paper is some preliminary thinking about class as part of my PhD research into working class schooling in Australia. In researching working class schooling, I am seeking to examine how class is made over through secondary schooling experiences. By made over I am signalling the unfinished discourse of educational inequalities and the reproduction of class advantage. I will present data from previous research undertaken into TAFE learning. That research project examined the divisions between academic knowing and technical knowing and how this connects with class and education. Franks story, that will be discussed in this paper was one of six students educational experiences of TAFE Learning. What was distinctive about Frank’s story was his excursions into TAFE as a trade apprentice and then later on as an adult learner seeking a to navigate a life course by undertaking studies in liberal arts. In addition to this data I situate Frank’s story of TAFE learning alongside an analysis of the character Ja’mie from the Australian mockumentary television program, ‘Summer Heights High. Providing both an actual educational experience

1 I am borrowing the phraseology of ‘made over’ after Skeggs’s research into reality television and how selves are made over morally. This is about personhood, disposition, value and exchange. Presentation, November 2007, Melbourne State Library.
through Frank and a screen mediated virtual education experience through the character of Ja’mie the relationships between class and education in Australia will be examined as they are both lived and culturally represented.

The story of Frank, a working class Maltese Australian man who attended a secondary technical high school, then trade school returned to education as an adult to complete studies in liberal arts. It was the experience of tertiary education in liberal arts that is the space from where Frank claims he truly got ‘an education’. Frank’s understanding of his education is about class. The classing of knowledge practices in education through different curricula patterns is but one-way class is made and understood in education.

In the popular television show Summer Heights High a middle class schoolgirl, Ja’mie, spends a ‘swap’ semester at a public school. Ja’mie is from Hilford Girls Grammar. The program traces Ja’mie’s experiences at ‘a povo’ public high school. Ja’mie is a bitchy teenage girl who is interested in doing well and comes from a well to do school. Doing an exchange at a ‘povo’ school is another opportunity among many for Ja’mie to hone and show off her talent and all round potential as a ‘hot’ somebody. According to Ja’mie she is not only hot and all the boys like her, but she is ‘the smartest non-Asian at Hilford’. Whilst a parody that relies on amplified stereotypes, the show provides an illuminating cultural representation of the machinations of school and class by juxtaposing characters whose ethnicity, gender and class inhere to perform classed subjectivities in and through the institutionalised structures and processes of schooling. As a popular cultural representation, the discourse of class throughout the mockumentary is embodied and enunciated at the
subjective level to reveal the persistence and salience of class for understanding and
explaining aspects of class and education in Australia today.

Class - values and cultures

By the close of the twentieth century, class as a useful concept for analysis in
education research had almost evaporated into thin air. Research in the 1980’s by
Connell et al (1982) and Dwyer et al (1984) into class and schooling pointed to how
values and norms of the middle classes were institutionalised through relationships in
schooling. Dwyer et al (1984) understood class as a relationship rather than as a
reified category. These works focused on the processes that make class groupings
especially in and through schooling. The subsequent rise of identity politics sought
to recognise the layers and intersections of class, gender, ethnicity and sexuality; and
in doing so theory and knowledge became more particularised and fragmentary. This
particularisation and fragmentation of knowledge pointed to the potential arbitrariness
of knowledge and its relationships to power and forms of domination. The
contingency of knowledge, in particular, an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’
(Lyotard:1982) signalled the exhaustion of class as the basis for critical meta-social
thought. Post–structural analysis and deconstruction became the new vanguard for a
critical engagement with the particular. Class pretty much became passé. Feminism,
queer theory, post-colonial and ‘cultural studies’ all became de riguer. Class was
washed up, it had become so 1970’s, to be historical about it or as Bauman explains it,
it was the loss of the ‘historical agent’2, that is, the working class as the potential
agents of revolution and redemption. The relevance of class as a category and as a

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2 In one of his recent publication, Liquid Fear (2006, p.162), Bauman considers the role of intellectuals
and social emancipation especially through the production of critique. Bauman engages the ideas of
Adorno to underlinethe loss of the working class/the proletariat as the ‘historical agent’ invested with
the task of revolutionary social change. Bauman repeats the disorienting affect of this loss of the
dynamic formed through the capitalist mode of production was subsequently declared dead by sociologists who overstated the fragmentary and relativist atmosphere of post-structural theory. What was overlooked is that fragments can have class too. The political and economic arithmetic previously used to define and explain class it was thought, seemed to fall short in providing critical and useful social understandings and explanations.

The Poststructural turn emphasised how patterns of domination are not merely economic or totalising for that matter, but are indeed, subjective, cultural and even symbolic. The conditions had thus been set for a disavowal of class, class struggle and class as a basis for critical inquiry. Just when class differences seemed to be intensifying and the concentration of power and wealth intensified globally, class went into a hiatus for sociologists and sociology more generally. Individuals discursively assembled in social spaces, and through tastes and style were theorised as agentic subjectivities. Structural imperatives such as the modes of production and consumption practices were theorised and understood as culturally contingent. Class by its very nature, as a concept category, a relation and in its formations are not value neutral and are indeed cultural. The moral or ethical dimensions to inequality were retheorised through relativist discourses on difference. Such a disavowal represents a wilful denial of something and not an unconscionable oversight. The interest in class as an area of research and analysis is not always hide bound to the utopic narratives and aspirations. The work that class does and can do in understanding and explaining people, societies, ideas and values is and continues to be undeniable.
In laying claims to the moral significance of class, Sayer (2005), argues that class inequalities are based on a lack of means by which to live, in ways that are recognised as having value. It is to issues of value and worth that Sayer takes up class as a continuing important sociological concept especially in the area of its undeniable moral significance. Following Savage (2001) Sayer theorises class as a ‘loaded moral signifier’, that is, class as a source of both embarrassment and of concern. For Sayer, people generally

“are likely to be concerned about class in terms of recognition of their worth, and want to be respected or respectable. But recognition and valuation are in part conditional on what people do (Sayer: 2005, p948)

Sociologically Sayer points to all human action for it is making and recognising worth and value that make human societies human.

Sayer identifies ‘lay normativity’ as imperative to the moral dimensions of class, underlying the importance of everyday understandings of right and wrong, issues of good and bad and what activities and dispositions are of worth and value. Normative questions about how one should act, or what one should do for the best; or what is good or bad about what is happening indicate that people care about things. For Sayer individuals are indeed normative beings that have everyday concerns that are at once localised yet generalisable and universal. That human’s justify their actions and are concerned about what they do in the world to others and themselves makes them particular kinds of human beings. This type of theorisation leads Sayer to argue for a ‘more cognitive view emotion as a form of evaluative judgement of matters’ (Sayer 2005a) With relation to class Sayer argues,

“feelings associated with class such as envy, resentment, compassion, contempt, shame, pride, deference and condescension are evaluative responses to particular
properties of class inequalities and relations. They are influenced but not
predetermined by position within the social field (Sayer:2005, p.950)”

Sayers sociological engagement of affect and emotions with class is not new.
Willis(1977) highlighted the importance of ‘refusal’ in his research into ‘why working
class kids get working class jobs’. Sennett and Cobb (1972) on the other hand
pointed to the personal injury of class. Sayers theoretical contribution, by underlining
the moral significance of class, alludes to the influence of values and morals. For
Sayer, values and worth are not shaped exclusively by social position but by class
distinction.

Moral sentiment and judgement for Sayer indicate class position not just social
position, yet occur through social relations with others and oneself. That people can
and do think and feel that they are better or more valuable than others or vice versa
underlines distinctions that are about class. The equation of the working-classes as
‘down to earth’ or the ‘middle-class’ as snobbish, posh or pretentious are examples of
moral valuations affixed through and by class. Sayer speaks of this as a kind of ‘moral
boundary drawing’.

Sayer explores the distributional aspects of moral fortitudes when he maintains,

“It is possible to identify structural features of society that add to the lack of moral
well-orderedness of the world, and do so not merely randomly by systematically and
recurrently, so that the goods and bads tend to fall repeatedly on the same people,
creating continuities in the reproduction of class and geographical inequalities
(Sayer:2005, p257)”. 
The moral significance that Sayer theorises is that class operates as a powerful source for the distribution of moral propriety in individuals, subjectively and geographically. One needs not think further than the normative ordering of the good suburbs or the ‘no-go’ suburbs or schools for that matter. A good school gets results whilst the bad school is either identified as under-performing or is labelled as ‘disadvantaged’.

Skeggs immense contribution to thinking about class illuminates the cultural exchanges and practices of class identity and formation, and their moral dimensions. For Skeggs,

“Discerning how positioning, movement and exclusion are generated through these systems of inscription, exchange and value is central to understanding how differences (and inequalities) are produced, lived and read (Skeggs 2004, p.4).”

Rather than a wholly moral rendering of class, Skeggs focus on the symbolic tells us about formations and enactments of class. The way in which bodies are inscribed with dispositions and differently valued through exchange activities. Skeggs’s sociology represents a theoretical understanding of class changes in both values and practices through time and space.

Thinking through class and mobility has a particular importance for participation in education. Skeggs shows how mobility is an important frame for social relations rather than structure. For Skeggs,

“The ultimate issue is not who moves or is fixed, but who has control - not only over their mobility and connectivity, but also over their capacity to withdraw and disconnect (Skeggs:2004, p50).”

Skeggs, through her use of a cultural economy of dispositional exchanges, identifies the contributory value given to or denied to classed subjects and people. People’s
capacity to withdraw or disconnect is enabled through perspectives that promulgate a control in/of the self.

Both Sayer and Skeggs recent sociological work on class provides an opportunity to revisit, and re-engage with class in research into social divisions in fields such as education. The value and worth of education and the exchanges that occur in activities of learning involves inscripting individuals with and through cultural codes that have particular morals and dispositions. That schooling and education can hold someone in-place or hold them back; or maybe propel them forward and upward underlines the relationships of mobility to education. In particular what we can see in education are ways in which class is central to practices of inscription and exchange wherein the attribution of value and perspective are struggled over to make over class distinctions.

Making over a life through education is precisely what Frank was doing when he went back to TAFE after working as a fitter and machiner and a project engineer. Frank studied liberal arts at TAFE and then went on to complete an honours degree in politics. When asked why he chose to study liberal arts Frank replied;

“I realised when I was at work that there were people that were….there were people who were really smart through education does that make sense? Its not that they were any brighter than anybody else, they just seemed to have lot more knowledge about the world, and why things are happening.”

(Frank)
The idea that people are smart but not any brighter than anybody else points to a value and moral judgement in Franks thinking that even with an education ‘they’, the ‘other’, those more educated, they are not better than anybody else.

Frank, in thinking about his previous employment in the machine workshop as a fitter and machiner, and then as a project engineer in the staff side of the metals manufacturing factory, expresses class values about differences afforded through education. Frank knows education and class through an insight into his own class identity in thinking about the ‘staff’ in the projects office that was separated from the shop floor,

“They just seemed to be. There was a difference. You could tell the educated people and the people that weren’t educated. And because I came from the shop floor, it was really pronounced….”

(Frank)

This perspective that shop floor staff showed their lack of education is further reflected in the interview with Frank. Outlining a class perspective about education Frank does so wherein he identifies ideas and practices about different ways of learning and knowing and how they are distributed, exchanged and valued.

“I never had what you would call an education. Because it was always in engineering, automotive, and all that kind of stuff at Glenroy Tech.”

(Frank)

Moral boundary drawing involves a hierarchy of values explicitly and sometimes implicitly in learning and education. What constitutes knowing, happens through exchanges where perspectives are made about what is worthy and valuable. Knowing
through technical schooling for Frank was recognised as not a capital e Education. Through a different type of education Frank achieves a different type of knowing, a knowing that meant crossing boundaries of knowledge traditions but also within himself.

“Glenroy tech taught me lots of stuff. A lot of practical stuff….even though it is significant in itself… it wasn’t held in esteem at all. In fact, tradesmen was a derogatory term used by people and staff and, so even when I was growing up to be a tradesman meant something, meant you were really quite skilled at a particular trade, it meant nothing at all to the wider world”

(Frank)

Not recognising the value and worth of his technical schooling or trade training as not ‘an education’ connects with the patterns of class and education, where the academic is classed as more worthy and valuable than a practice based technical education. These divisions in ways of knowing are read through ways of being wherein the ‘educated’ are recognised as either informed or not. How do we value schooling in a context where the prizes of education lay in university admission?

Well, the character Ja’mie, certainly knows what her education at Hilford Girls Grammar is worth. It means being ‘really successful and everything’. Maybe she may even become famous. From the materiality of Frank’s understandings and experiences of education, Ja’mie as a spoof character in a satirical mockumentary represents the aspirational schooling of bourgeois education. Hot housed and position conscious, Ja’mie is the stereotype of girls who attend elite private schools. The script in this mockumentary is laden with class stereotypes and affectations. That the private school girl Ja’mie is a ‘successful student’ engaged in learning epitomises the worth
of the middle class student. Ja’mie’s character is contrasted with other characters who belong to the ‘povo’ public High School. As an outsider, Ja’mie commentates on both the aesthetic and moral degeneracy of public schools.

These representations of differences between public and private education although highly inflected through the production values of satirical television, are indeed easily recognisable for Australia audiences. What we get from Summer Heights High is class amplified yet denied. To look at the characterisation of class in Summer Heights High, I will discuss three scenes from the series that feature Ja’mie. The ‘First Day’ scene shows a self-possessed private school girl sharing her feelings about doing a ‘swap’ at a public school.

Ja’mie: “I’m freaked out this morning we like live ages away from Summer Heights High”

The divisions spatially and geographically of classed education provision is made apparent as is Ja’mie anxiety about the ‘strangeness’ of the environment. In relating to the other schoolgirls, Ja’mie is self-assured. She knows her own place and the place of classed others.

In the scene, ‘Public School Friends’ we see Ja’mie and her new public school friends chatting about the differences between public and private school kids; who recognise and live a segregated existence on the basis of the particular school attended.

Ja’mie: “My friends and I used to drive past public schools as a joke like to see all the bogans, ……Oh my god I am so glad I am not one of them.”

Jess one of Ja’mies new public school friend, retorts,
Jess: “They judge you before they meet you like what you thought when you first saw us”.

Further into the discussion between all of the girls, the girls from Summer Heights High obtain a bond with Ja’mie by identifying themselves as “like private school versions at a public school”. The mobilisation of dispositional traits attached to private or public school attendance underlines a cultural economy of signs and sites of class. The exchange of dispositions does not occur through an even playing field of choice but rather happens through the uneven distribution of external resources and an unequal valuation of dispositional traits and abilities.

To smooth over these sorts of class differences the girls from Summer Heights High suggest a social event where Ja’mie invites her private school friends and her new public school friends. Ja’mie recognises that no matter what the girls think, Ja’mie truly believes that at such an event “There would be a clash”. Summer Heights High synthetically dramatises a class clash through amplified stereotypes to highlight how class is made in places and spaces through exchange. The lexicon of bogans and snobs are played out through and read into culture through television programs like Summer Heights High. The program operates as a synthetic version of reality television as it seeks to be “real”, hence the mockumentary genre. As a cultural representation of class and schooling Summer Heights High is a synthetic hyper-real play and exchange of messages and symbols about class, selves and values.

And finally in the ‘First Impression’ scene we see a Ja’mie monologue about how, “At public schools, girls are skanks”. Whilst offensive, yet humorous in a bitchy way, Ja’mie’s concern and judgement about difference is spoken in terms of crude
reproduction. Ja’mie moralises that the parents of kids at public schools aren’t caring enough about their own children’s futures by sending them to public schools. She wonders why they don’t get good jobs, for Ja’mie it’s a “Cycle of skankiness that I am so glad I am not a part of.”

In Franks story we see his understandable judgement that technical school was not a real education as the denial of working class schooling. And with Ja’mie, it’s about neglectful parents who don’t care. A lack of recognition of the continuing presence and salience of class in education in recent scholarly research is based on a disavowal of class. But any disavowal always surely serves to amplify the feedback of what is being denied. Class and education in Australia inhere in a cultural economy in which entitlement is refuged in the doubting public high school student who thinks he is not good enough, whilst the entitled private school student knows she is not as good as she could be. Class persistence as an undeniably important aspect of sociological inquiry is indeed everywhere and nowhere.

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**Bibliography**


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