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Class, economism, individualisation and Post Compulsory Education and Training.

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Abstract

The paper considers the broader policy context in which English Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) is placed, examining the model of class implicit within policy documents and particular currents within new Labour thinking. It notes that class relations and patterns of inequality have deepened. Class as a structural feature of the social formation has been obscured as a result of individualisation and allied theorisations. Whilst class may be obscured, it remains a salient feature of contemporary society. Personalisation of the curriculum and changes to 14-19 education are related to class formation and the on-going generation of inequality. The closing section of the paper comments on current work that examines teaching and learning in the sector, suggesting that class needs to be placed in a pivotal position in such analyses. It concludes by arguing that a concern with social justice as well as one that seeks to interrupt processes of class formation necessitates a politicised practice that extends beyond the classroom. This requires an analysis that stresses the salience of class but also works with an expansive notion of practice that calls for a politicised understanding of PCET.

Class, economism, individualisation and Post Compulsory Education and Training.

Although this paper explores questions of class as they arise in English post compulsory education and training (PCET)⁽¹⁾, the discussion has a wider application. The contextual features of PCET in England resonate with those found elsewhere in the developed world. The paper considers the broader policy context of PCET, examining the way in which class is conceived within policy documents and social theory as well as currents within new Labour thinking. These issues are addressed in the first section of the paper – policy frames. Here two key policy documents are considered *The Learning Age* and *World Class Skills* published respectively in 1998 and 2007, both being concerned with lifelong learning, the skills agenda and the on-going economisation of education. In addition the conceptualisations of Beck, Giddens and Savage are explored in relation to class and processes of individualisation. This discussion is set within patterns of inequality addressed in the subsequent section, which in turn is followed by one that analyses the current policy emphasis upon 14-19 education, personalisation and the raising of the age of compulsory participation in education to 18. The concluding section, PCET and Class, comments upon existing ethnographic work, its relationship to class formation and closes with a call for an expansive practice that moves beyond education into the broader political arena.

It could be suggested that the paper addresses the “blindingly” obvious presence of class within PCET, one need only enter a college of further education in England to become aware of markers of class distinction, as reflected in dress and bodily demeanour. Yet the logic of much policy is to play down the significance of class as a structural phenomenon. Whilst class is acknowledged in much ethnography, this work can easily fold over into a reproductive problematic by drawing attention to the continuities between learners’ class origins and trajectories and consequently fails to move towards wider political engagement (Avis, 2006).

Policy frame

It is now almost ten years since the publication of new Labour’s, *The learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain*, that constructed a consensual image of society, one in which all would benefit from a culture of learning.

Our vision of the learning age is about more than employment. The development of a culture of learning will help to build a united society, assist in the creation of personal independence, and encourage our creativity and innovation...

For individuals:

- learning offers excitement and the opportunity for discovery... It helps all of us to improve our chances of getting a job and getting on...

For businesses:

- learning helps them to be more successful by adding value and keeping them up-to-date. Learning develops the intellectual capital which is now at the centre of a nation’s competitive strength...

For communities:

- learning contributes to social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging, responsibility and identity...

For the nation:

- learning is essential to a strong economy and an inclusive society. In offering a way out of dependency and low expectation, it lies at the heart of the Government’s welfare reform programme... (DfEE, 1998, p10-11)

These themes are reprised in *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England*:

For adults, better skills and economically valuable qualifications are a route to achieving better jobs, career progression and higher incomes to support their families. Better skills are the key to greater social mobility, ensuring that individuals can get on because of their talent and hard work, and not just because of background.

For employers, a more highly-skilled workforce is a route to achieving higher productivity and, in the private sector, greater competitiveness and profitability. For communities, better skills can create an escape route from generations of low ambition and low achievement. (DIUS⁽²⁾, 2007, p6)

The economism of this position and the rhetoric surrounding competitiveness has remained a consistent feature of education and social policy. A feature characteristic of new Labour's social and economic policies which is applied throughout the education system. In addition it is important to recognise these themes, under various guises, have been a feature of educational policy throughout the twentieth century. The assumption that education plays a pivotal role in the development of national competitiveness remains pivotal in new Labour policy, as does the concern to interrupt those cultures that appear antithetical to educational success. The aim is to create a learning culture for all. The outcome of such a culture, or so it is claimed, will be a successful economy, a society marked by social cohesion and inclusion, which it is hoped, will lead to patterns of social and occupational mobility that match the individual's potential and talent. In other words the development of a learning culture that leads to a fairer and more just society, one in which the structural inequalities of class are transcended, being relegated to the past.

To the extent that class is considered in this policy rhetoric it is marshalled in two ways, either as a gloss for disadvantage and for those cultures that devalue education, or as a critique of the elitism of privileged groups (Skeggs, 2004). In the case of the former, the goal is to enculture the socially excluded to develop dispositions or forms of subjectivity that enable educational engagement and success. Early manifestations of this current are expressed in *the Learning Age* and the Fryer Report of 1999 which stated:

In our country today, far too many people are still locked in a culture which regards lifelong learning as either unnecessary, unappealing, uninteresting or unavailable...

It follows that proposals to change this culture will require action on many fronts, over an extended period, winning people to new ways of working, new priorities and a new sense of what is seen as normal and largely unremarkable. (Fryer Report, 1999, p8)

The need to create a new culture of learning in which the learner takes responsibility for their own development is similarly present in *World Class Skills*.

We must create a new culture of learning at all stages of a person's career and skills development. Too many people, even in today's environment of high employment and rising skills levels, are left behind. We must do more for those who face the biggest challenges in breaking out of poverty, worklessness, or a low-pay, low-skilled job without prospects. (DIUS, 2007, p22)

Class is represented as disadvantage, being linked to worklessness, low pay, jobs with few prospects as well as with atavistic cultures that devalue learning. Education is seen as the route out of this situation with class viewed as a form of cultural disadvantage and as a residue of a previous epoch.

Before commenting upon a second way in which class is marshalled, it is important to recognise that the Labour party is not all of a piece and that there are various currents and discursive repertoires that can be mobilised. These derive from old Labour, submerged Marxist traditions as well as political contingency in which class can be drawn upon for its salience to oppositional politics (see, Avis, 2005; Cruddas, 2008; Lawton, 2005). The second way in which class is mobilised represents a less explicit theme within new Labour's policy discourse, presenting itself as a critique of unwarranted and undeserved privilege, and is illustrated in pronouncements by Prescott and Brown (see Lawton, 2005). In 2000 Prescott (2000), the then deputy prime minister, and Gordon Brown (2000), the then chancellor of the exchequer and now prime minister, criticised the elitism of Oxbridge for the failure to support meritocratic principles (and see Brown, 2007b). This critique is directed at the prejudices of those in privileged positions rather than at the structural relations of class. Class in this instance becomes re-worked as cultural elitism rather than as a facet of structural relations. There is an affinity between this critique with its Fabian

echoes, and that forwarded by a new managerialist or technicist middle class, of a traditional upper/middle class founded on the elitism of the older professions and the more prestigious universities (Lawton, 2005; and see Apple, 2001, 2004). This position is echoed in the critique of the complacency of welfare professionals forwarded by a particular current within new Labour, which similarly aligns with the orientations of a managerialist fraction within the middle class (see Mulgan, 1998; and various Demos publications).

In these discussions class is treated as a residual and dysfunctional phenomenon of a previous age that has no place in a vibrant forward thinking knowledge society (see Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1998). Class comes to be seen as the antithesis of a modern progressive society, atavistic and out of step with society's preferred "direction of travel".

The prime minister, Gordon Brown, whilst emphasising the importance of fairness and opportunity for all states:

Every British citizen with every chance to make the most of themselves – every community fair to every citizen – **if you work hard, you're better off. If you save, you're rewarded. If you play by the rules, we'll stand by you.** These are for me the best of British values: responsibilities required in return for rights; fairness not just for some but all who earn it. [My emphasis] (Brown, 2007a)

Brown expresses a version of meritocracy together with an implicit critique of unwarranted privilege (Brown, 2007b). The paradox is that class is smuggled into the discourse, present in the othering of particular sections of the working class as well as the upper class who possess significant inherited wealth. This rests alongside the constitution of the middle class as the 'particular universal class'.

[The middle class] has become the 'particular universal class'. That is to say, although it was in fact a particular class with a specific history, nonetheless it has become the class around which an increasing range of practices are regarded as universally 'normal', 'good' and 'appropriate'... The practices of the middle class have increasingly come to define the social itself. (Savage, 2003, p536)

The consequence of these shifts is that the middle class whilst being normalised, is rendered unremarkable, unnoticeable and in this sense, invisible. As a result of such processes it becomes constituted, in Savage's terms, as the paradigmatic class. It is in this way that class has been smuggled into a policy discourse that construes itself as having moved beyond class. However, class remains an implicit theme in this discourse and is in this sense an absent presence.

The subject of this paradigmatic middle class aligns with forms of subjectivity that sit with a neo-liberalism that stresses individualism and competition. Brown's emphasis on rights and responsibilities, like those of his predecessor Blair, echoes neo-liberal themes, and for all its concern with fairness, capitalist relations are left securely in place as are the resulting patterns of inequality. Capitalism remains unquestioned, as is its relation to the generation of class-based inequalities and structural relations. There is an affinity with third way thinking that implies that there has been a shift in the relationship between capitalism and class (Giddens, 2000) and that the development of the knowledge or information society marks an epochal and step change in these relations (Cooper, 2008; Rustin, 2008). There is the suggestion that class is an atavistic concept, belonging more readily to a previous epoch. The ideological significance of such arguments is apparent and is reflected in the constitution of the middle class subject. Yet, it is important not to homogenise the middle class and to recognise that such constructions lean towards a particular fraction of this class

embodied in state policy and that in addition processes of individualisation are framed by state action. Olssen comments:

The shift from classical liberalism to neo-liberalism... involved a change in subject position from 'homo economicus'... to 'manipulatable man', who is created by the state and who is continually encouraged to be 'perpetually responsive'. It is not that the conception of the self-interested subject is replaced or done away with... but that in an age of universal welfare the perceived possibilities of slothful indolence create necessities for new forms of vigilance, surveillance, performance appraisal and of forms of control generally. In this new model, the state has taken it upon itself to keep all up to the mark. (Olssen, 2003, p199-200)

A particular fraction of the middle class assumes this mantle. Commenting on the regulative apparatus of neo-liberalism, Walkerdine *et al* write:

The two classes are not simply the bearers of differing amounts of power and cultural capital, but the regulative apparatuses of particular modes of government at different historical moments produce different kinds of subject, and power is implicated not in the possession of capital but in the actual self-formation of the subject. (2001, p142)

Walkerdine *et al* remind us that the regulative apparatus of the state, despite protestations otherwise, constitutes the middle and working class subject differently. The former is normalised as the individualised neo-liberal subject, with the latter being the 'other' who lacks these desired attributes and who needs to acquire the appropriate dispositions for success in the knowledge society. The sidelining of class and its constitution as an atavistic category serves a key ideological function, as does the uncritical acceptance of capitalism.

Inequality

Paradoxically, in a conjuncture that has seen class inequalities deepening, they have become increasingly marginalised in state policy (Feinstein, *et al*, 2007). Part of the reason for this lies in the way in which current economic changes are understood. Here the arguments of Beck (1992, 1999; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and Giddens (1998, 2000) are significant. Whilst it is overstated to imply that these authors' work with notions of classlessness, nevertheless their arguments imply that class has far less salience in the current conjuncture. Beck goes so far as to suggest that class has become a 'Zombie category' (Beck, 1999). In a global context older understandings of class are thought to be increasingly irrelevant, there being limited scope for the play of class in detraditionalised societies. Similarly, if working class communities are deemed to be emblematic of class, their decomposition can be seen as a marker of the decline of the significance of this category, or indeed as indicative of the 'death of class'. At the same time the focus of social democratic policy, as expressed by new Labour, has been reconfigured. For Giddens the pursuit of redistribution is far less salient than the 'redistribution of possibilities'.

... redistribution must not disappear from the agenda of social democracy. But recent discussion has... shifted the emphasis towards the 'redistribution of possibilities'. The cultivation of human potential should as far as possible replace after the event 'redistribution' (Giddens, 1998, p100-101)

Such a stance is indicative of an emphasis upon individualisation and detraditionalisation, as well as a rupture with conceptualisations of collective class-based cultures.

Within such a context class relations are marked by continuity and change, with learners being placed within a socio-economic structure that serves not only to reproduce inequality but also the privileges of those already advantaged. Such processes occur throughout the education system. The historical relationship between class and education remains in place, with those drawn from higher social classes overachieving and being more likely to attend prestigious universities (Blanden *et al*, 2005; Blanden and Machin, 2007; Reay, *et al*, 2005).

The patterning of inequality is further reflected in the distribution of income and wealth. In 1976 the wealthiest 5% owned 38% of marketable wealth, in 2003 this had increased to 40% (National Statistics Online, 2006). Sennett commenting on the remuneration of top executives writes:

... massive compensation of top executives, a widening gap between wages at the top and the bottom of corporations, the stagnation of the middle layers of income relative to those of the elite. Winner-takes-all competition generates extreme material inequality. (Sennett, 2006, p54)

Such inequality is legitimated by the alleged requirement to recruit top executives best able to add value to the organisation, even if only minutely, to gain competitive advantage. The consequence is that such remuneration becomes legitimated as a requirement for success within a globalised economic system⁽³⁾. State intervention to ameliorate such inequalities is seen as antithetical to the long term competitiveness of the social formation. Over the last three decades there has been a continuing, and some would suggest, a deepening polarity in the distribution of income and wealth (Allen and Ainley, 2007).

These inequalities are set within a context in which the middle class faces increasing insecurity in what has been described as the hour-glass economy, and who subsequently place a premium upon the educational success of their children (Thompson and Lawson, 2006; The Inequalities Review, 2007; Ball, 2003). Yet this insecurity is placed in a context in which young people's life chances are highly structured by social class. Walkerdine *et al*, in their study of girls remind us:

Our data show that class location designated on the basis of parents' occupation and importantly, educational credentials, is the most efficient predictor of life chances in the lives of girls and their families. (2001, p58)

This situation is compounded by a decline in the rate of intergenerational mobility (Blanden *et al*, 2005; Thompson and Lawson, 2006).

Relative social mobility in the UK had fallen over the closing decades of the 20th century. In particular a number of studies examined cohorts of children born in 1958 and 1970, concluding that there was a much stronger association for the latter group between where they started out in life and where they ended up than for those born in 1958, indicating that relative mobility across generations has declined in the last two decades. (Fabian commission, 2006, p14)

Thus, the PCET policy context is one where issues of class have been appropriated in a very particular way, being aligned to a cultural model in which the disadvantages of class can be addressed through the provision of opportunity deemed able to overcome such inequalities. Yet class remains an important feature of social relations, exercising a profound impact upon the life chances of young peoples. In the current conjuncture, marked by a decline in the rate of social mobility and an increase in insecurity facing what Allen and Ainley (2007) refer to as the 'insecure working/middle class', the class structure has been subject to re-composition. Perhaps the error has been to tie class relations to a very particular historical

moment and therefore to ignore its dynamic and processual nature. Such relations are always in the process of being re-shaped and re-formed and we must recognise that class is a dynamic concept, even though the notion of structure implies a certain fixity.

It is nevertheless important to recognise that class is complex and that it is necessarily raced, gendered and aged, as well as set in particularly spatial locations. Thus for example, Preston's (2003) work can be related to the racialisation of a particular section of the white working class whilst Skegg (1997, 2004) explores the constitution of a section of white working class women. Similar analyses have explored processes relating to the black and asian working class (Archer, 2003; Archer and Francis, 2007; Shain, 2006). In addition the manner in which class relations are played out will partly be framed by spatial location, such as between a metropolitan centre compared with a declining industrial area (see for example, Ball, *et al*, 2000; Warren and Webb, 2007).

Policy context

This section considers the policy context of PCET and the homology between this and class formation. In order to do this changes affecting 14-19 education, as well as the current focus on personalisation are examined. It would be overstated to straightforwardly associate an interest in personalisation with individualisation and the formation of the neo-liberal bourgeois subject. Savage (2000) reminds us that in an earlier period at the apogee of the 'traditional working class community', the formation of the working class male subject was shaped by forms of individualism that emphasised personal autonomy and control over the labour process. Savage's argument refers to the collective and historical formation of working class communities as well as the autonomy and control that craft workers exercised over the labour process, suggesting that there is no necessary contradiction between individualism and collectivity. The point is that individualism and allied processes of personalisation cannot straightforwardly be applied to a particular class disposition. It is important to recognise that personalisation will be accented differently and discursively shaped in relation to variously classed, and we could add, raced and gendered subjects. The normalisation of a particular construction of the middle class subject serves to 'other' differently positioned subjects and sits alongside related differentiations. This is reflected not only in curriculum and institutional divisions but also in processes of personalisation and individual action planning. The emphasis placed upon personalisation was heralded in new Labour's five year strategy (and see, Blair 2004b, DfES 2004),

The central characteristic of such a new system will be personalisation – so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit the system... and as young people begin to train for work, a system that recognises individual aptitudes and provides as many tailored paths to employment as there are people and jobs. And the corollary of this is that the system must be both freer and more diverse – with more flexibility to help meet individual needs; and more choices between courses and types of provider, so that there really are different and personalised opportunities available. (DfES 2004, p4)

Gordon Brown shares a similar commitment to personalisation, stating in his 2007 conference speech: "Education available to all – not one size fits all but responding to individual needs. This is the future for our public services. Accessible to all, personal to you. Not just a basic standard but the best quality tailored to your needs". And repeating a Blairite theme, "Education is my passion" (Brown, 2007b). The 2006 white paper on Further Education echoes these concerns, anticipating the focus upon a demand-led system expressed in the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) and *World Class Skills* (DIUS, 2007).

A system which focuses on employability and aims to support the future success of young people and adults will be one which responds more and more sharply to the needs and demands of its customers – learners and employers. (DfES, 2006, p34)

14-19 education and training states:

A tailored 14-19 phase must mean that young people can pursue their aspirations, choose learning that is tailored to meet their needs and through study and hard work qualify themselves to achieve their aims. (DfES, 2005b, p23)

The focus on personalisation and addressing learner need is unevenly accented. This is reflected in the development of vocational pathways in the new diplomas for 14-19 year olds (DfES, 2006a, b), directed at those who are or may become disaffected from education. It is hoped that by addressing the vocational interests of these young people, initially at the age of fourteen, that they will retain a foothold in education (Higham and Yeoman, 2007). Whilst this may be the case with diplomas, the hierarchical structure of English education means that it is unlikely that any more than a very small proportion of these young people will enter tough-entry universities (Brown and Lauder, 2006). This is despite the attempt by Ed Balls, secretary of state for education, to develop the diplomas to include sciences, languages and humanities (Balls, 2007; DCFS, 2007).

Currently there are moves to raise to eighteen the age at which young people must compulsorily participate in education. The proposal being that:

- All young people should participate in education or training until their 18th birthday;
- Participation could be at school, in a college, in work-based learning, or in accredited training provided by an employer;
- In order to count as participating, young people would be required to work towards accredited qualifications; and
- Participation should be full time for young people not in employment for a significant part of the week, and part time for those working more than 20 hours a week. (DfES, 2007, p19)

Whilst there is a return to the classroom, for those who are 'othered' and deemed unsuited, alternative provision will be offered. Such developments extending the period of formal education are marked by a series of differentiations between types of learner that mirror the tripartite divisions that have historically been a feature of English education (Allen and Ainley, 2007). There is a resonance in these proposals with the youth training schemes of the 1970s which emphasised compliance and acceptance of a transient youth labour market (Moos, 1979).

Under the guise of personalisation and emphasis on a demand-led system the vocational/academic divide, with its concomitant class divisions, is being reproduced. Similarly the tripartite structure of PCET and divisions between the academic, technical and vocational are on-goingly constituted (Brown, 2006). These divisions are in part reflected in the contrast between an inclusive stance towards those disaffected from education for whom the diplomas have been developed, and a more exclusionary one towards the academically orientated. For the latter group the focus is on A levels, that offer greater differentiation and are able to 'stretch' learners. Brine (2006) points to similar differentiations between able and less able learners in European Union policy documents. *14-19 Education and Skills* calls for "greater stretch and challenge" (DfES, 2005, p63) as well as for increased differentiation at A level so that universities will be able to choose between "the highest performing candidates" (DfES, 2005, p63). It is anticipated that A*

grades will be awarded from 2010 (Meikle, 2007). This elitist and exclusionary focus sits uneasily with and in contradiction to new Labour's commitment to social justice (but see, Allen, 2005,a,b;). Paradoxically, these processes are indicative of a tripartism which coincides with a curriculum offering differentiated forms of knowledge, one 'delivering' learners to qualitatively different labour markets and classed futures. For those allocated to lower level vocational courses the likely route is towards semi- and low-skilled work, with educative experiences aimed at developing the dispositions required for waged labour. These processes are linked to class formation, albeit that these operate and are lived at an individual level. Such processes contribute towards the formation of class relations as well as to practices of social control, serving an important ideological function through the marshalling of notions of opportunity. Although notions of personalisation are somewhat fluid and can be placed alongside networked and dialogical relations and therefore constitute sites of struggle, they are lodged within an economistic logic that rests with a neo-liberalism (Leadbeater, 2005, Fielding, 2008; Hartley, 2007). Personalisation can at best ameliorate rather than challenge class inequalities that derive from market and capitalist relations.

PCET Research and Class

This section raises three issues, none of which are necessarily new but do require reiteration, and when brought together emphasise the importance of a structural conception of class and an expansive understanding of practice. Whilst interventions into the classroom make a difference these need to be set within the relational context of PCET. Secondly, analyses that explore the lived experiences of learners can easily fold into a reproductive logic and in that way marginalise formative processes arising within PCET, by implicitly pointing towards the continuity between origins and class/occupational trajectories. Finally formative processes concerned with the making of class have to be set within a wider context. If such work is to undermine the perpetuation of class inequality it needs to be placed alongside an analysis that seeks to intervene in wider society and engage with progressive social movements.

It is possible to draw a distinction between analyses that adopt a sociological orientation, concerned with the relationship between class, gender and race, and those orientated towards pedagogic and related processes in PCET⁽⁴⁾. Inevitably, and in some of the best work, there is an overlap between these two currents (Ball, *et al*, 2000). Yet policy, and in particular state research funding, has placed a premium on pedagogy through its preoccupation with the development of various forms of learning culture deemed suited to the twenty-first century. Although such cultures derive from participatory and collective learning processes, they are ultimately played out at the individual level (see TLC special issue, JNET, 2003; James and Biesta, 2007; Educational Review, 2007; and see allied discussion of personalisation, Leadbeater, 2005). There are two related points to be made. First, in relation to educational processes and individualisation, Savage reminds us:

Class is effaced in new modes of individualization, by the very people – mainly in professional and managerial occupations – whose actions help reproduce class inequality more intensely. But class cannot be completely effaced. Class creeps back, surreptitiously, into various cultural forms, though often in oblique ways. (Savage, 2000, p156)

The above encourages analyses to explore not only the way 'class creeps back' but also the manner in which this contributes towards the 'making' of class in individualised forms as

refracted through learning culture and personalised learning. The second point to note is the way in which:

... the 'individualisation' of contemporary societies is not something which simply happens; it is also something actively encouraged by governments persuaded that the market is the only mechanism by which collective decisions can and should be taken over the allocation of resources in a complex situation. (Gilbert, 2007, p52-53)

And as Warren and Webb note:

If personal dispositions are, in part, actively constructed through state action, and the social conditions of choice are complicit with relations of power, what is the role of research in PCET? Is a focus on learner experience and their accounts of their 'choices' adequate to understand processes at play that constitute these conditions of choice? At a time when globalised forces are producing localised effects in terms of economic restructuring and educational reform, is largely localised educational research focus enough? (2007, p10)

This is the wider context in which PCET research takes place and the terrain on which new forms of personalisation and action planning operate, necessitating a politics and analysis that links localised relations to the wider social formation.

Warren and Webb (2007) suggest that when the Bourdieusian notion of habitus is marshalled, serving to alerts us to the cultural processes that bear upon the dispositions carried into education, this can be at the expense of the allied conceptualisation of field. In other words early processes in the formation of habitus are highlighted, which inform the dispositions brought into education. The consequence of these tendencies is to push explanatory accounts further and further back into an individual's biography so that family, childhood socialisation, early schooling and so forth, become manifest in the habitus and dispositions carried into PCET. Certainly, these are strongly articulated to patterns of inequality and are pivotal in the formation of classed, raced and gendered subjects, as well as informing current educational experiences. It is also important to consider on-going processes that are connected to the 'making' of class. We need to be attentive to the specificity of such processes within PCET, especially those that mark a break with class origins as well as those that conspire to form the middle class subject.

When thinking about PCET the concern to foreground class processes could be construed as 'tinkering around the edges' (Reay, *et al*, 2007). For many young people educative experiences in PCET may hold relatively little significance when set against the rest of their lives. It is important to see the 'making' of class as an active process rather than one that merely acts in continuance with the trajectory of other social relations and locales. PCET becomes a site of struggle in which processes of resistance, rupture and formation arise unevenly in relation to one another. Yet these processes cannot be thought of outside the wider structural relations of education. This is why the 'making' of class, has to be considered relationally, and it is because of this, that we need to operate with a politicised and expansive understanding of practice. The 'making' of class is a cultural process in which distinctions and forms of 'othering' are constructed. Analysis needs to draw out these processes, relating them to class formation in wider society, thus necessitating a consideration of structural relations. In this way practices related to the formation of class in PCET need to be articulated to those in wider society. A politicised practice seeking to interrupt these processes cannot remain located solely in education but needs to move beyond the classroom and institutional context to wider society. Unsurprisingly it is in this former context of the classroom and institution that policy interventions are placed.

There are a number of tensions in the preceding discussion. It could be accused of playing down the significance of current work exploring class-based processes in PCET. So for example, work rooted in Bourdieuan notions of field and habitus, including its institutional and vocational variants, is centrally concerned with the articulation of structure and agency and the playing out of class in educational and classroom processes (TLC special issue JVET, 2003; Colley, 2006; Morrison, 2007a, b; Webb and Warren, 2007). Yet the 'making' of class within PCET could be more directly addressed, in the sense that the specificity of the processes therein and the manner in which learner dispositions are re-formed leading to a break from their previous cultural locations. It is here that notions of 'othering', hierarchicalisation and differentiation play a part. These processes can be seen in Kehily and Pattman's (2006) work exploring the manner in which academic sixth-formers constituted themselves as middle-class *subjects-in-the-making* by pathologising working-class dropouts (p38). Work focused upon the psychological costs of educational engagement also points towards the 'making' of class, such costs are manifested in a sense of 'inadequacy', of not being good enough and the resulting anxiety reflect classed processes. Skeggs (1997, 2004) illustrates this in her study of working class women. Similarly, Walkerdine *et al* (2001) point to the way in which such processes affect not only working class but also middle class girls, whereby anxiety and a sense of inadequacy become accented in a particular manner, being articulated to class formation. These processes may become mapped onto divisions within and across educational institutions (Grubb, 2006) whereby learners 'choose' a particular course on the basis of their assumed capabilities. Bathmaker has explored such processes in her study of General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) students who felt they were not good enough to study A levels and has noted similar processes within a differentiated higher education system (Avis *et al*, 2002; and see Atkins, 2007). Reay *et al* (2007) also point towards the 'making' of class in their discussion of working class students. These students engage differentially with higher education, with those located in tough-entry institutions holding qualitatively different orientations from those in colleges of FE or new universities. In this instance differentiated class-based formative processes can be discerned that anticipate varied class trajectories. Working class students placed in tough-entry universities follow trajectories that anticipate the 'making' of middle class subjects, whereas those following a higher education route in FE face qualitatively different destinies. Whilst the previous discussion may simplify these processes, it serves to illustrate and raise questions about the 'making' of class. There are a number of points to be made; in some cases the preceding analyses can be read as being in continuity with the dispositions and habitus learners carry into PCET. To the extent that such a reading occurs this is set within a reproductive logic. Conversely such a stance can be set alongside an apparently more active process of class formation arising amongst learners who break with their class origins. Yet it is also important to recall Bernstein's (1971) adage that 'education cannot compensate for society'.

Processes of class formation cannot be fully thought through without considering the wider socio-economic context within which learners are placed, and importantly, the relational context of education. That is to say educational processes taking place within PCET need to be considered in relation to those arising within schools, sixth form colleges, universities and so on. If we wish to interrupt practices of class formation we need to operate at different levels and locations - the classroom, the institution as well as the wider socio-economic context. This calls for a politicised practice that extends beyond the classroom and that seeks to interrupt wider patterns of inequality present within the social formation. Such a practice necessitates an engagement with those social movements committed to progressive change - in other words the pursuit of nonreformist reform.

In the current conjuncture in which neo-liberalism has become hegemonic with new Labour accepting uncritically the tenets of capitalism, it becomes difficult to identify such

movements. Yet, the contradictions that beset not only the policies of new Labour but also the economic context contain progressive possibilities. Countervailing currents are present amongst radical educators and those orientated towards widening participation. Similar currents also exist amongst young people, parents and those faced with the contradictory outcomes of education - its 'broken promises' (Finn, 1987). Paradoxically the 'hollowing out' of class structure in the 'hour glass' economy undermines the complacency of a middle class fraction, replacing this with a sense of risk and insecurity. Here lies a possibility for the development of progressive alliances. Progressive tendencies exist within the traditional organisations of the working class - the trade unions and elements within the labour party (see *Renewal* 2006 e.g., Thompson and Lawson, Cruddas; *Renewal*, 2007 issue on social democracy; Hill, 2007).

Towards a conclusion

This paper has examined the construction of class in new Labour policy discourse as well as related social theory. In such accounts class is viewed as an atavistic concept, though this is belied by the material inequalities that criss-cross English society. Later sections of the paper sought to re-center class formation as a pivotal focus for analysis of PCET. There is a tension between analyses that address the 'making' of class within PCET and the structural relations of class within wider society. An interest in interrupting such processes in PCET can only take us so far, with localised interventions necessarily having to be set alongside those in wider society. There is a conundrum. In a class based society we cannot escape processes of class formation and will be positioned in relation to these. Whilst those working within education may struggle for participatory parity⁽⁵⁾ for their learners, as well as the development of criticality, this remains set within the context of a classed society. Thus there is a need for an expansive and politicised practice that engages with wider social movements that are struggling for social justice. Herein lies a politics of hope.

Notes

1. PCET is being used in a fluid way, being associated with colleges of Further Education in England, institutions that bear some resemblance to Community Colleges in the US and Technical and Further Education Colleges (TAFE) in Australia. Further education colleges in England deliver vocational and technical education, but they do more than this, having an important role in 16-19 education, latterly provision for 14-19 year olds, and also adult education. FE colleges are diverse institutions whose provision can range from basic skills to degree level work.
2. In July 2007 the DfES was divided into two new departments, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF).
3. Analysis of income and wealth distribution is notoriously difficult. Dorling *et al* suggest: "analysis of income data between 2003 and 2005 indicates that areas with the highest average incomes experienced the greatest increases, in both absolute and relative terms, while some areas with the lowest average incomes experienced declining incomes, increasing polarisation" (2007, pxiii). Babb *et al* similarly commented: "there is evidence... based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS), but also from data from tax returns, that there has indeed been much more rapid growth in the top one per cent of incomes than for the rest of the distribution. The reasons for this growth are not yet well understood, but

possible explanations include changes in the nature of executive remuneration and the dynamic effects of the cut in top rates of tax over the 1980s on capital accumulation" (p44)

4. Whilst this distinction plays down the variety of educational research, the dichotomy is reflected in papers published in journals such as *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.

5. "[Participatory parity] requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers. For participatory parity to be possible... two conditions must be satisfied. First, the distribution of material resources must be such as to ensure participant's independence and 'voice'... The second condition requires that institutionalised patterns of cultural value express equal respect for all and ensure equal opportunities of achieving social esteem" (Fraser, 2003, p36).

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