

Class Strategies and the Education Market

The middle classes and social advantage

Stephen J. Ball

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Class Strategies and the Education Market

Modern state education was essentially formed around the needs and interests of the middle class. The middle classes are currently very much at the centre of all politicians' electoral concerns. Nevertheless sociological and educational research has tended to neglect the middle class. *Class Strategies and the Education Market* examines the ways in which the middle classes maintain and improve their social advantages in and through education.

Drawing on an extensive series of interviews with parents and children, this book identifies key moments of decision-making in the construction of the educational trajectories of middle-class children. Stephen J. Ball organizes his analysis around the key concepts of social closure, social capital, values and principles and risk, while bringing a broad range of up-to-date sociological theory to bear upon his subject. From this thorough analysis, valuable and thought-provoking insights into the assiduous care and considerable effort and expenditure, which go into ensuring the educational success of the middle-class child, emerge.

The middle classes are a sociological enigma, presenting the social researcher with considerable analytic and theoretical difficulties. *Class Strategies and the Education Market* provides a set of working tools for class analysis and the examination of class practices. Above all, it offers new ways of thinking about class theory and the relationships between classes in late modern society.

Stephen J. Ball is Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education and Director of the Education Policy Research Unit at the Institute of Education, University of London.

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For John Ball 1381/1994

When Adam delved
and Eve span
Who was then
a gentleman?

From The Peasant's Revolt of 1381

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1 Introduction

Between structure and hermeneutics

Of course, personal initiative is the hallmark of the middle classes ...
(Lockwood 1995: 10)

... the middle class has in many ways been the central symbol of twentieth-century life in the west, a reflection of western anxieties and hopes ...
(Owensby 1999: 11)

This introduction is an exercise of meta-writing, an attempt to draw some lines and limits around a piece of work that constantly goes beyond itself and at every turn ‘stumbles against what it does not mean’ (Foucault 1974: 17). I therefore want to draw these lines in particular by accounting for what this book is not about, what it does not do. In this respect I shall endeavour, perhaps fruitlessly, to clarify the standpoints from which the book is written and guide the reader towards a position from which the book might be read as eclectic but nonetheless coherent. I do this in part because the book has some unconventional aspects to it, although in another sense it is a throw-back, a re-invention of old themes and concerns from within the sociology of education – in particular the multifaceted relationships between families, public institutions and educational inequalities. In this introduction then I will sketch in the general orientations of the project; specific aspects of these orientations are taken up in more detail in later chapters. Each of the substantive chapters focuses upon one or more key themes and works on these in interaction with empirical materials.

This is a book written between rather than against.¹ It defines itself as different from rather than opposed to and I am certainly not ‘trying to reduce others to silence’ (Foucault 1974: 17). Neither is this an attempt to have the last word, far from it; no closure is sought or claimed and I will be working on rather than closing off these concepts. It is intended to be read as a set of statements to be worked on, to be developed further in relation to an obdurate and brute reality. My project here has a particular concern with ‘appraising concepts as possibilities for future thinking’ (Colebrook 2000: 5).

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... the peculiar difficulty of sociology, then, is to produce a precise science of an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality. For this it is better that its concepts be polymorphic, supple and adaptable, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly.

(Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 23)

I am interested in subtleties and nuances here rather than stark and distinct patterns and relationships, indeed this is not a field of analysis that lends itself to that sort of style of interpretation – if you are looking for some kind of clear-cut class story of stark oppressions and determinisms then you are reading the wrong book. To use a sociological cliché, this account is addressed primarily to ‘the revelation of complexity within cultural processes’ (Watson 1993: 193). In good part, as I have indicated, the task of the book is the assembly of a toolbox of analytic possibilities rather than the display of findings. It is a cautious and stumbling text. It is a pragmatic or synthetic sociology rather than an ideological one. It is about exploring the way ‘the social’ works. It is about mapping rather than explaining. There is no pristine theoretical exposition to be displayed nor any avant-garde posturing. I am attempting to gather together and elaborate a particular package of concepts, or a ‘moral vocabulary’ (Parkin 1979: 115) that may be useful for ‘the exercise of making things intelligible’ (114). In articulating this vocabulary I have sought, as far as possible, to escape from the seductive simplicities and the ‘comforts of certainty’ (Stronach and MacLure 1997) offered by the binary. Both in class research and in qualitative analysis binaries have a certain obviousness to them. But binaries can obscure as much, if not more, than they reveal; they avoid complexity and divert our attention from what lies between, that which is neither one thing nor the other. This text is littered with the promises and pitfalls of the dual classification and not all of these are eschewed but neither are they indulged in without care. Finally, the division of the text into chapters does not indicate neat divisions nor a linear narrative. Indeed, as you will see, the issues addressed and concepts deployed interweave, elaborate and build upon one another.

This text is, then, a hybrid. It is part empirical; data are deployed in various ways – sometimes to illustrate, sometimes to demonstrate, sometimes to speculate and I shall endeavour to be clear about which is which. The aim is to achieve a degree of plausibility. The text is also, as already noted, in part conceptual. I am attempting to define, develop and relate together a set of concepts which offers ‘perspective’ in understanding the complex relationships between social class and social justice in contemporary educational settings with a specific focus on the middle class. I shall focus on the rhythm and murmur of middle-class voices; their changing cadences and concerns, their expression of dilemmas and ambivalences. These are voices of confidence and uncertainty, which are sometimes also confused, voices which are articulate, persuasive and authoritative but also careful, measured

and thoughtful. These voices are quoted at length in the text, in part because of what they tell us about class practices but also because they are a medium of practice. The middle class gets things done at home, work and in engagement with ‘expert systems’ through talk of a particular sort. They represent and perform themselves as moral subjects, as efficacious social actors and as classed agents, through talk.

I shall be working across the surfaces of class and trying to eventualize class. This is one form of what Savage (2000: 41) calls ‘a kind of “strategic inductivism”’. My focus is on key moments of anxiety, fear, action and efficacy, on the micropractices of social reproduction, and on the situated enactment of class skills, resources, dispositions, attitudes and expectations. These are moment of ordinariness and exclusivity (Savage 2000). I shall be dealing with tendencies and patterns here, and dominant discourses, but, where I can, I shall avoid trading in a simple essentialism of the middle-class subject. I am certainly not dealing here with a set of mindless inevitabilities – again complexity is favoured over parsimony. Thus, I am interested in the power and usefulness of exceptions and spend some time, at various points, on these. Also this is not an exercise in methodological individualism; my individuals are thoroughly embedded in social relations. I am interested in the ways in which ‘class structures are instantiated in people’s lives’ (Savage 2000: 150). I am seeking to excavate and interrogate the common sense and the naturalness which underpins individual reasoning and practices, what Eder (1993: 9) calls the ‘cultural texture’ of class ‘that is prior to the motivations of actors and their individual class actions’.² In all this I am very conscious of Bourdieu’s warning that:

... the perfectly commendable wish to see things in person, close up, sometimes leads people to search for the explanatory principles of observed realities where they are not to be found (not all of them in any case) namely, the site of observation itself.

(Bourdieu *et al.* 1999: 181)

This is also a further development of my work towards a policy sociology and more specifically the ‘policy cycle’ (Bowe, Ball and Gold 1992; Ball 1994; Ball 1997b). This account focuses on particular moments in the policy cycle and the practices of policy enacted by groups of parents who are ‘called up’ by and ‘into’ policy as ‘choosers’ and ‘consumers’ of education. Each of these moments is represented by a different corpus of data, drawn from different research studies (see Appendix I). These moments are major points of transition and differentiation at which times key class resources are brought into play and issues of identity, responsibility and aspiration are up front. When advantage is at stake, I suggest, habitus comes fleetingly into view. In effect we have the possibility of seeing the same children and same parents in action at four different points of transition in the education/care system – arranging pre-school child care, the move from

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primary to secondary school, compulsory to post-compulsory education, and the choice of higher education. At these points classed capitals and dispositions engage with classed policy regimes and, I shall argue, are differently legitimated and privileged. I shall also consider the relationships between middle-class parents and the state in other respects.

I am working hard here to embed education within broader trends of social change and changes in the class structure – and thus to relate the field of education to general social theory and class analysis. I draw heavily on Bourdieu throughout, and Parkin (1979) and Brown (2000) (see Chapter 2), and Crook (1999) in Chapter 7, and Jordan, Redley and James (1994) are key interlocutors in Chapter 6, as is Savage (2000) in Chapter 8 and elsewhere. In passing, I refer to Giddens' (1994) and Beck's (1992) work on individualism but express a number of concerns about the generality of their theorizing and their failure to recognize the relational nature of identity formation. I suggest that they give inadequate attention to the different ways in which different social groups are confronted by 'systemic contradictions' and the uneven distribution of resources, of different kinds, which enable reflection and choice, despite some passing disclaimers.

I have to say that I am not making, indeed cannot make, any kind of clear and simple argument claiming that the processes and perspectives that are described here are different from before. Nonetheless, at times this may be a logical and valid interpretation based upon the data presented – at least that which represents the perceptions of parents. In this respect, as we shall see, there are both continuities and differences to be addressed. Before-and-after comparisons are not my main concern here. What I am doing primarily is to indicate how things are within the current regime of policy in education. However, I am arguing that various conditions and contexts encourage or hail certain actions and attitudes in a different way from before (see Chapters 2 and 7).

For the middle classes it is the best of times and the worst of times; a time of affluence and risk, opportunity and congestion, celebration and anxiety. As always by definition this is a class-between, a class beset with contradictions and uncertainties. As Ehrenreich (1989: 15) puts it: 'If this is an elite, then, it is an insecure and deeply anxious one'. Roberts (2001: 162) echoes this, suggesting that 'the present day middle class is anxious rather than complacent and comfortable'. And yet, this was ever so. Lewis and Maude (1950: 273) wrote that 'the attitude of the middle classes towards the future is much what the attitude of the individual breadwinner always is: an amalgam of dread and confidence', and the 'middle classes are beset with worries. But this is no new sensation' (288). The combination of dread and confidence is a recurring theme in this book (see also Owensby's, 1999, account of the Brazilian middle class).

In some respects, as noted already, as a recasting of the sociology of education this exercise is a return to the beginnings of work on class inequalities in the 1950s and 1960s, with its emphasis on locating the motor of inequality

within the family (Craft 1970; Douglas 1964; Floud, Halsey and Marton 1956). While I would not want to turn back the clock as far as underplaying the role of institutional differentiation and other social factors in producing educational inequalities, there has been a neglect of the actions of families, and particular family members, in recent times (with a few exceptions like Crozier 2000; David 1993; Vincent 2000 and Reay 1998b). We now have the theoretical resources which enable attention to be paid to the differences within and between families without an immediate collapse into social pathology. According to Nash (1990: 446):

Through Bourdieu's work we have been able to reconstruct a theory of the family and recover the centrality of family resources to educational differentiation within a radical context which allays fears of a retreat into cultural deficit theory.

Why are the middle classes interesting? In part simply because they constitute a major contemporary phenomenon in their own right. They are worthy of attention because they are there. Because there are so many of them: 'The middle class is now Britain's second largest; it is pressing on the heels of the working class and accounts for roughly a third of the population' (Roberts 2001: 141). But further they are of particular importance within the sociology of education within education, because their actions produce or contribute to the perpetuation, inscription and reinvention of social inequalities both old and new. New forms of old inequalities and new forms of inequality. As Savage (2000: 159) argues:

If there is still a role for class analysis it is to continue to emphasize the brute realities of social inequality and the extent to which these are constantly effaced by a middle class, individualized culture that fails to register the social implications of its routine actions.

With more than a little over-simplification contemporary work on social class takes three main forms: class theory, the attempt to define classes theoretically, and recently to incorporate race and gender within such definitions (Anthias 2001; Crompton 1997); class analysis (or social stratification), the attempt to establish and operationalize systems of class categories, 'who belongs where', which can then be used for various kinds of correlational, comparative or mobility research (Goldthorpe 1980; Goldthorpe 1996; Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980); and class practices, which incorporates a variety of work ranging from consumption research, work on identity, workplace studies and experiences of oppression, inequality and social reproduction – the last includes recent auto/biographical work on working-class girls 'made bad' (Mahony and Zmroczek 1997). Looking from the outside in on all of this is a more recent critical tradition which explores the demise of class (see Crompton 1998 for a definitive

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overview and below). However, within all of this, despite the recent upsurge of empirical interest in the middle classes, alongside a long-standing debate around the issues of definition and theorizing (see Scott 2000 for a good account), there is relatively little empirical or conceptual development around middle-class practices apart from the important work done by Savage and Butler and their colleagues and one or two others (e.g. Butler and Savage 1995; Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding 1992; Savage 2000; Sulkunen 1992; Wynne 1998; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody 2001 and Power, Edwards, Whitty and Wigfall 2002). This text engages neither with class analysis (boxes) nor class theory (abstraction). The focus is upon class practices. Specifically, this study contributes to a body of recent work which is attempting to return to an emphasis on the lived realities, the situated realizations, of class and class reproduction (Butler and Robson 2002a; Butler and Robson 2002b; Jordan, Redley and James 1994; Maguire 2001; Reay 1998b, etc.). I also locate myself theoretically and take up issues laid out within what Brown (2000) calls Positional Conflict Theory (see Chapter 2). As such my discursive terrain is hemmed in on all sides by analytic niceties and categorization systems, theoretical fideism, and postmodern scepticism – the idea that class is no longer that important.

Concepts of class, class analysis and class society are, as Pakulski and Waters (1996: 2) validly claim, ‘notoriously vague and tenuously stretched’ and as they go on to say: ‘The debate about classes combines issues of semantics and substance’ (2). Indeed the conceptual and methodological quagmires in which class is embedded often means that ‘one hardly knows what one is talking about’ (Foucault 1996: 447). So let me try to be clear. I shall be using and troubling these concepts at the same time. Holding some ambivalence towards the usefulness of class, set against a very strong sense of the presence of class within the politics and practices of contemporary education. In writing this classness into being I will inevitably give emphasis to its facticity. My topic becomes a resource.

I take it that class ‘is something that happens (and it can be shown to have happened) in a human relationship’ (Thompson 1980: 8–9). Class here is an identity and a lifestyle, and a set of perspectives on the social world and relationships in it, marked by varying degrees of reflexivity. Identities, lifestyles, perspectives and relationships are ‘constituted in the course of collective history’ and ‘acquired in the course of individual history’, which ‘function in their practical state’ (Bourdieu 1986a: 467). Class, in this sense, is productive and reactive. It is an identity based upon modes of being and becoming or escape and forms of distinction that are realized and reproduced in specific social locations. Certain locations are sought out, others are avoided. We think and are thought by class. It is about being something and not being something else. It is relational. Class is also a trajectory, a path through space and time, a ‘history of transactions’ (Walzer 1984). We are not always the same, or always able to be the same. Our current sense of who we are may be deeply invested in once having been someone different

or wanting to be someone else in the future. Similar class positions are held and experienced differently, and have different histories. Class positions and perspectives are produced from and invested with the traces of earlier choices, improvisations and opportunities as well as being inflected by chance. Transactions are cumulative; ‘aspects of action and interaction are constantly being negotiated, reformulated, modified and so on as a result of experience’ (Devine 1997: 9). Each new choice or point of decision is confronted with assets or capital (economic, social and cultural) to be exchanged or invested; for an individual or a family volumes of capital may be ‘increasing, decreasing or stationary’ (Bourdieu 1986a: 120). Advantages in the form of capitals can be stored and accumulated for future use (Lee 1993). In other words, I take class to be dynamic and emergent, as Savage (2000: 69) puts it ‘people now have to achieve their class positions’. As such, reproduction is never guaranteed and mobility, up or down, is always possible (see Chapter 4). Such mobility is both contingently and strategically dependent. Here class and class inequalities are treated and ‘understood dynamically’ (Savage 2000: 69) as ‘a longitudinal process rather than a cross sectional one’, but nonetheless the analysis here primarily addresses the issue of the relative stability of class relations – stable and static are not the same: ‘real world classes are constantly being constructed around us, people are constantly doing class’ (Connell 1983: 148). This is about how class is achieved and maintained, and enacted rather than something that just is! Class is realized and struggled over in the daily lives of families and institutions, in consumption decisions, as much as in the processes of production, and particularly at moments of crisis and contradiction as parents think about the well-being and happiness and futures of their offspring. Class is about knowing how to act at these defining moments. Class is of course a massively over-represented subject, this is a further contribution to that over-representation. But it is important to be clear that class is only one possible position from which parents act – some of the others are very evident in what follows.

The action here takes place within the field of educational choices and its particular grid of power, and the social agents at work in this field are located according to the type, composition and volume of their multiple capitals. Embedded in this field, I shall suggest, are a set of social–symbolic and material oppositions which structure it. Oppositions which are manifested in struggles of access, closure and advantage, a particular kind of class struggle; which is not necessarily constituted by overt antagonisms. The:

character of educational provision is itself a battleground within the middle classes as well as between middle and working classes, in which those already endowed with cultural capital are engaged in conflicts with those who have not.

(Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding 1992: 152–53)

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Closure is a very decisive feature within this field of social action, a very particular form of a 'space of relations', or more precisely, relations within a set of sub-spaces. However, here, only one set of social locations within this space are addressed. This enterprise is about 'education as an *aspect* of class' (Rikowski 2001: 1). Education as a field of distinctions and identities is crucial in high modern society in changing and reproducing the borderlines of class and distributing unevenly and unequally forms of social and cultural capital.

As noted already, Bourdieu's concepts and his thinking about class and education are a key resource in this exercise. I share Annette Lareau's view that Bourdieu's various accounts of the interplay of structure and agency and his conceptual paraphernalia offer a way of tracing the reproduction of social inequality into the 'strategies and actions that individuals follow in their daily lives' (Lareau and McNamara Horvat 1999: 38) and thus a way of seeing the structuring process at work, and exploring the work of 'social structure in the head'. Lareau also makes the point that Bourdieu 'has not always been sufficiently aware of variations in the ways in which institutional actors legitimate or rebuff efforts by individuals to activate their resources. Nor has he given sufficient attention to the moments of reproduction and exclusion, although both these points are implied in Bourdieu's work' (38). Thus, this is an effort to ground and eventualize Bourdieu in some specifics of capital activation.

Again, I should make it clear that the question as to whether there is more inequality than within previous policy regimes is not a primary concern here. I am more concerned with the kinds of inequalities currently embedded in education and how they work. Nonetheless the 'logic of the market', as I interpret it, would suggest more inequality and the great bulk of the research, although not all, does seem to indicate that there is relatively greater inequality in market systems than in the systems that immediately preceded them (see Chapter 3). That is to say the weight of evidence, of diverse kinds, from various sources and locations, does seem to tip the balance towards the conclusion that inequality is more prevalent in 'post-welfare' education systems.

As should be already evident, the interpretational calculus of my account rests upon an approximation of Bourdieu's basic analytical framework. That is, the relationship between structure (system properties), dispositions and recognisable social practices, with the addition on my part of an explicit role for the state. The particular rendering of this is encapsulated in Figure 1.1. My approach here is thoroughly embedded in Bourdieu's (1986b: 243) 'general science of the economy of practices', applied to and developed within this specific field.

While not centre-stage in this tragedy of class relations the 'somber reality of the state' (Parkin 1979: 119) is crucial to a proper understanding of the particular class practices with which we are concerned (see Chapter 3). Here, following Parkin, I offer a 'conceptualization of the state as the political

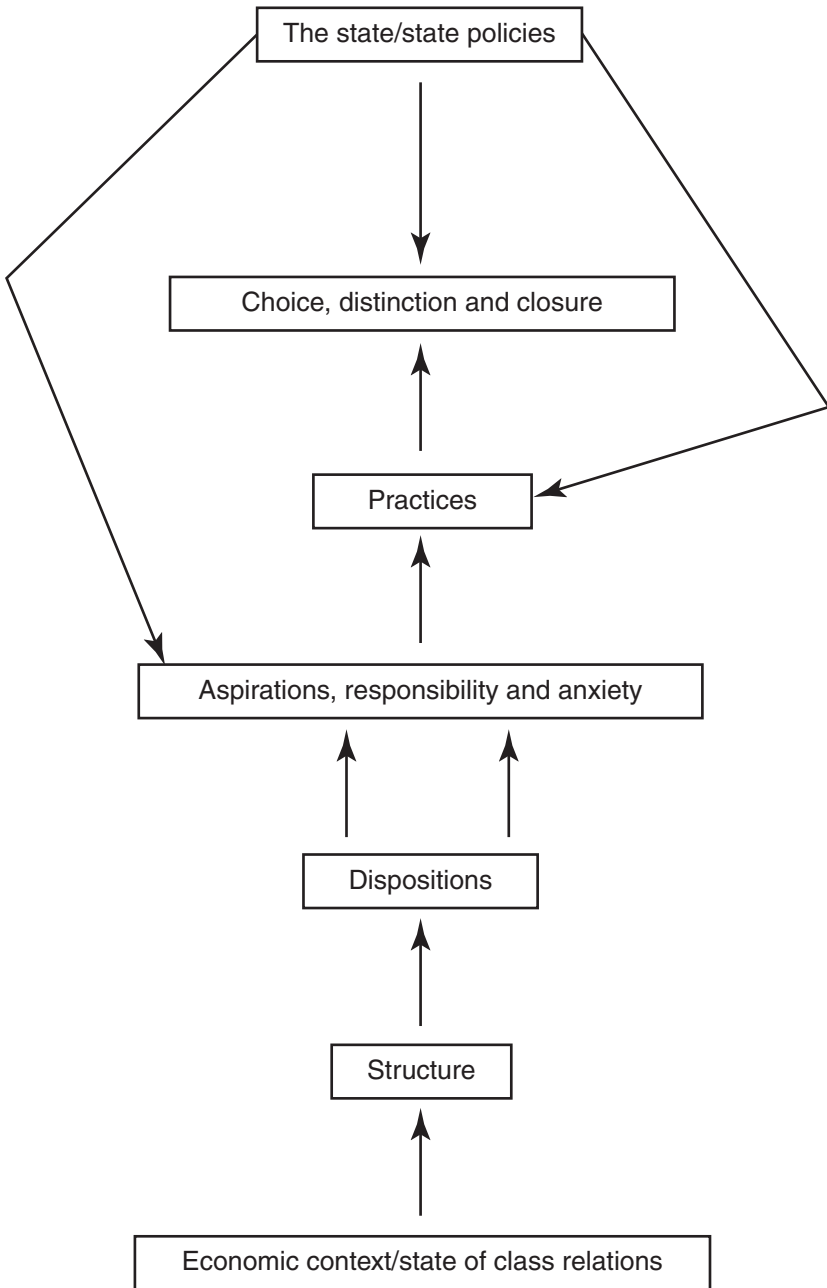


Figure 1.1 Structure, class and state: an analytic framework for education policy and practices

locale or the distillation of class antagonisms' (140), as a 'dependent variable', or a 'condensate', as Poulantzas (1973) would have it. This gives rise, I would suggest, to the embedding of particular versions of 'class thinking' within the policy making of the state, and thus gives a particular emphasis to the ways in which the state acts upon class relations and class struggles (see Ball 1993).

Class perspectives then have to be understood as they are articulated from within changing political discourses and policy regimes, in particular within the discursive framework of 'the market society' and 'the aesthetic of consumption' (Bauman 1998). The difference from 'before' as Bauman (1998: 24) puts it 'is one of emphasis, but that shift of emphasis does make an enormous difference to virtually every aspect of society, cultural and individual life'. Put simply, in a 'market society' markets and market relations are the basic frameworks for understanding social order (Slater and Tonkiss 2001: 1).

It is probably evident already that throughout this endeavour the conceptualization of class is essentially Weberian.³ That is, my representation of class is located in the market rather than within the social organization of production. In Weberian terms I conceive of educational decisions and choices as forms of 'market exchange' in which assets are traded. For Weber (1961: 82) 'the kind of chance in the market is the decisive moment which presents a common condition for the individual's fate'. Importantly, the Weberian market-based model of class and class conflict allows us to examine the multidimensional nature of struggles within the marketplace and commonalities of fate. Weber was also very aware of the dynamic nature of capitalist societies and therefore of class groups and concomitantly the dynamic nature of monopolization as 'a fundamental process in the economy' (Collins 1986: 127). Here we are concerned with the monopolization of particular educational sites and trajectories. This and his assets-based class categorization provides the basis for a consideration of variations and divisions within the middle class. Such a conceptualization also provides a direct link to Bourdieu's analytic framework for class. That is:

The primary differences, those which distinguish the major classes of conditions of existence, derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the set of actually usable resources and powers – economic capital, cultural capital and also social capital.

(1986a: 114)

In part the preference for this model of class rests, as Parkin (1979: 112) puts it, 'on the claim that it draws attention to a set of problems and issues that are otherwise obscured'. The class relations, and struggles, explored here are best understood as competition and exclusion, although they may also be thought of as forms of symbolic violence.⁴ It is difficult to represent them meaningfully as forms of direct exploitation or oppression, although

they are caught up within the reproduction of more general relations of exploitation. Relationships of domination remain as ‘a latent social relationship’ (Eder 1993: 167) within the middle classes.

As should already be apparent my discussion of class here does not rest primarily upon any ‘independently defined structure of positions’ (Parkin 1979: 113) but rather collective modes of social action and social practices are taken as the defining features of class. However, it is clearly necessary that I draw some boundaries around my conception of the middle class (see Appendix I), and specify some bases for identifying intra-class differences. Even so, the general strategies or modes of action of the middle class as a whole remain in the foreground of my concerns rather than an attempt to systematically identify fractional variations (see Chapter 6).

All of this suggests the need to live with a degree of fuzziness in the categorization of class here. The various categorizations referred to in the text are useful in different ways but focus upon slightly different aspects of class position and class perspective in each case. They illustrate the multi-dimensionality of class, and in some respects the gaps between objective position and the lived realities of class. They also draw attention to the complex trajectories of families we might want to call middle class. While the families represented in the text are similar in many respects, they are different in others. Their relation to a class identity in terms of values, and in some cases attendant practices, vary from entrenched to ambivalent. The role of liberalism, and the degree of competitive individualism evident within these middle-class families produce significant variations in themselves (see Chapter 6).

I am not then, in a traditional sense, interested in ‘sterile attempts to map out class structures’ (Savage 2000: 158). I am not what Rikowski (2001) calls a ‘box person’, preoccupied with ‘definitions’ of class. But I am interested in the ways in which the middle class represent their class location to themselves, their awareness of a class identity. I shall argue that in their euphemistic talk and in their social practices they do evince a form of such awareness of class (see Chapters 4 and 5). Class is inexplicit but pervasive in their educational strategies – ‘encoded in people’s sense of self-worth and their attitudes to an awareness of others – in how they carry themselves as individuals’ (Savage 2000: 107), or in their lifestyles (Berking 1996: 199) ‘that today appear to fill in the blank space left by the modernization process in the exchange between individual and society’. For Berking lifestyles are socially distinctive variants of cultural practices; ‘Life styles include the subjective and group-related constructions of actors who in this way fashion their reality’ and ‘invest it with meaning’ (199). However, while I am dealing here with the subjective states of actors I am certainly not intending to lose touch with the material bases of class difference at least as regards the distribution of financial and property assets.

Nonetheless, it would certainly make some sense to see the recognitions and rejections embedded in education markets, the comfort and discomfort

expressed by the respondents in the field of education in terms of such group-related constructions (see Chapter 5). Especially if we accept Berking's argument that: 'Lifestyles present themselves as relatively homogeneous entities of collective intentions of representation and rules of observation' (199). Theoretically this links very straightforwardly with Bourdieu's point that: 'The division into classes performed by sociology leads to the common root of the classifiable practices which agents produce and of the classificatory judgements they make of other agents' practices and their own' (1986a: 169). And empirically, with Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding's (1992) analysis of divisions among middle-class consumption patterns.

A colleague once described my work as unfair to the middle classes. This is not the point. I am not interested in condemning or redeeming the people referred to or who appear in this text, either individually or collectively. I am not intent upon labelling and judging them. Rather, my concern is with understanding them, or some small aspect of their lives and in doing so to unpack some of the mechanisms that animate the education marketplace – the workings of the 'hidden hand' if you like, and thus the operation of class perspectives and dispositions, their emotions, values and perceptions of risk, and the role of middle-class capitals. I am concerned with some of the ways in which their social world is uttered and constructed 'in accordance with principles of vision and division' (Bourdieu 1992: 232). Also I want to attempt generally to represent their dilemmas, fears and anxieties. In this respect I shall try not to trade too much in and upon the simplicities of 'qualitative cut-outs'. I hope that some of these families might seem familiar and at least at times sympathetic.

However, all of this begs questions about the 'I' which recurs through the text. How do I relate to these middle-class families? Who is the 'I' in text? It is not a single unified 'I' that is for sure. There is the 'I' who was a working class 11-year-old, uncomfortable and 'out of place' in a middle-class grammar school, faced for the first time, mental arithmetic aside, with the bitter tears of school failure. The 'I' undergraduate, first in his family to go to university, reading about himself in the works of Jackson and Marsden (1962) and Lacey (1970), and finding a vocation. The 'I' research student studying working-class children in a comprehensive school. The 'I' professor, without children of his own, safe on the moral high ground, 'othering' the middle class as an analytic stance. All of these Is are imbricated in the text and implicated in my interpretive work.

Topics and themes

The main chapters in the book are organized around a set of topics or concepts each of which provide a focus for discussion. They are: social class, strategy, policy, social closure, social capital, risk and values and principles. However, cutting across these are a number of analytic themes which recur

and interweave, in different forms, throughout the book. These are: boundaries, ambivalences, responsibility, fear and uncertainty, individualism and reflexivity. These themes in particular, and the analytic orientation of the book generally, work against any simplistic binarizing across class divisions. While, on the one hand the text does articulate a class binary of working-class/middle-class differences, on the other, there are various asides to and forays into the messiness of class fractions. For the most part my analysis avoids dislocated grand narratives like individualization, risk society, consumerism, post-modernity. The focus here is on the proximate world of everyday life. That is, the situatedness of class, within an economic and social structure, and its realization in practices, in specific locations and at particular, critical moments.

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