

Ciaran Burke

University of Ulster, UK

And Then What Happened?: A Critical Examination of the Role of Class in Graduate Employment (0156)

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The rise of post-industrialisation and, with it, the knowledge economy has firmly placed education as the primary tool of social mobility to increase one's life chances. As such, the university is seen to be the central institution to provide this social mobility – so much so that the “success” of a university graduate is measured not by their degree classification but by the employment they are able to secure upon leaving higher education. A direct and clear consequence of this human capital discourse of “access equals success” is that there are more and more individuals reading for degrees in U.K. HEIs. As a result, we are in a situation of graduate inflation; in other words, there are fewer graduate jobs than graduates, leading to graduate unemployment and underemployment. This context is the starting point of the research project which this paper will discuss. In the situation of fewer graduate jobs than graduates and the relative cancelling out of educational capital – as graduates applying for positions have generally quite similar levels of education – this research asked “do other forms of capital influence graduate trajectories?”; in other words: “does social class, with *a priori* levels of capital, play a directive role in graduate employment trajectories?”

The research project recorded the life histories of 27 Northern Irish graduates, who all graduated between 3 and 10 years before the research was conducted. The respondents were stratified by social class (working class/middle class), Higher Educational Institution (pre-1992/post-1992) and gender (male/female). The focus of the study was to measure and contrast respondent's levels of aspirations and strategies in relation to both the educational system and the graduate labour market. Adopting Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) conceptual tools (habitus, capital and field), the findings provide a critical examination of the influence of habitus and capital on respondent's educational and (graduate) employment trajectories.

The research findings do not provide a binary relationship between graduate employment and class. There are working class graduates in graduate employment, while some middle class graduates are unable to enter the graduate labour market. However, in general, there is still quite a clear binary picture, as the majority of working class graduates are unable to enter the graduate labour market, whereas the majority of middle class graduates enjoy quite successful and seamless employment trajectories. It is the general binary relationship, of classed relations, on which this paper intends to focus.

This paper will demonstrate the persistent low levels of aspirations and strategies that working class graduates have possessed from secondary level

education to their time at university and, crucially, once they have graduated. In contrast, the paper will demonstrate the high levels of aspirations and strategies that middle class graduates have possessed throughout their time in education (secondary and higher) and their post-university lives. The paper will show how middle class graduates, largely irrespective of their educational capital, are able to exchange other forms of capital (social and cultural) to successfully manoeuvre within the graduate labour market. These trajectories are in contrast to working class graduates who either rely on their educational capital to enter the graduate labour market or, through having low levels of other forms of capital (social and cultural), are unable to enter the graduate labour market and are forced to settle for non-graduate employment.

To further illustrate that there is a classed pattern of levels of aspirations, strategy and capitals (relevant to finding and securing a graduate position), this paper will conclude by discussing two pairs of graduates. Each pair of graduates – one member middle class and one working class – attempted to enter the same graduate position. The first pair attempted to enter Human Resource Management, and the second attempted to become professional artists. The paper will show that it was the middle class graduates in each pair, irrespective of their degree classification or which institution at which they read for a degree, who successfully entered their chosen profession. The middle class graduates in each pair had strong levels of aspirations, strategy and forms of capital; the levels of aspirations and strategies and composition of capitals were quite the opposite for the working class graduates.

A key observation of the paired graduates is that the working class graduates either had a higher degree classification or read for their degree at a more prestigious university than their middle class counterpart. However, it was *a priori* capital and high levels of aspirations and strategy – the graduates' habitus – that had a much greater and directive influence on their employment trajectories. The paper concludes by arguing that the human capital discourse of “access equal success”, manifested in the current widening participation agenda, is not an effective position to address social mobility. The central issue comes from human capital theory and the late modern positions of commentators such as Beck (1992, 2007) and Giddens (1991), which have been diluted into social policy, of the reflexive individual creating their own trajectories in a fluid society and breaking down previous barriers, such as class and gender, through qualifications – the primary form of “currency” in a knowledge economy. Findings from this research and previous studies (Bourdieu and Boltanski, 1978, 1981; Brown and Scase, 1994; Brown *et al.*, 2003; Furlong and Cartmel, 2005, Smetherham, 2006, Brooks and Everett, 2009) have demonstrated the classed nature of graduate employment. However, as a result of such discourses, the concept of class is seen as out dated and not applicable to today's individual. For an effective widening participation policy, and for working class graduates to successfully enter the graduate labour market, the continuing influence and structural constraint of social class needs to be acknowledged. Graduate unemployment/underemployment must stop being seen as a trouble and recognized as an issue (Mills, 1959).

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