Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

0428

Class at the Friction Point - Exploring Class Theory in a Transforming Higher Education Landscape

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract: This paper theorises social class through the linked concepts of friction points and thresholds. It explores a theory of class suited to the transforming landscape of higher education and its relationship to broader social structures and institutions. Higher education is constituted as a classed friction point - a phenomenologically experienced but structurally significant limit of certain forms of being that are either remade or deflected during higher education access and participation. This dispositional threshold entails that people who share diverse or non-conforming cultural tastes and practices must adapt to suit the narrow and dominant cultural norms expected within higher education. These markers of social class can provide a powerful form of symbolic recognition, as an individual's language, lifestyles, social networks, aspirations can all be 'classified' and used to determine their value. This, subsequently, determines what cultures, ways of being, trajectories and strategies are successful in higher education.

Paper: Within policy discourses, participation in higher education is heralded as offering opportunities for a more fulfilling job and better pay or security, all accessible on a meritocratic basis. However, these discourses hide the durability of social-structural effects in maintaining patterns in the distribution of higher educational benefits and privileges. This paper advances previous work exploring how revitalised theories of social class can offer new insights into the reproduction of higher education inequalities in the Australian context (Bunn, Threadgold and Burke 2020; Threadgold, Burke and Bunn, 2018).

While the signs, measures and markers of class have become harder to track, its effects remain stubbornly entrenched if not growing in their impact. It is becoming harder to neatly categorise homologies, whether around occupation, consumption or material wealth. Theories of social class thus need to be adapted to the turbulent conditions that continually reshape its boundaries.

Class boundaries are theorised in this paper through the concepts of friction points and thresholds. The notion of friction points refers to the fluctuating social structural conditions of class that produce boundary conditions. These points are where class is permeable, where class boundaries 'leak' (Skeggs, 2004). It where energy is continually invested in the maintenance of class boundaries as new conditions reshape the objective conditions and possibilities attached to different social positions. Public debates and policy surrounding notions of merit (Littler, 2018), intelligence (Bourdieu, 1996) and quality (e.g. Gale and Parker, 2017) continue to build friction throughout the university as to who belongs and what the values and purposes of higher education should be. These produce an intra-

social boundary reflected through numerous social institutions and domains.

Friction points function as phenomenologically experienced but structurally significant limits that deflect social mobility through a dispositional threshold. In this threshold, it is not possible to carry over certain forms and conditions of being. These must instead be revised, mutated and adapted to suit the conditions being entered into. This is because dispositions produce a 'socially sanctioned' (Bunn, Threadgold and Burke, 2020) distribution of value that individuals can recognise both in themselves and others. In social interactions, people can thus assess, judge and classify people according to outward signifiers. Markers of social class provide a powerful form of symbolic recognition, as an individual's language, lifestyles, social networks, aspirations can all be 'classified' and used to determine their value and enacted as a boundary that restricts or enables access to different social positions.

Class is not so heavily prescribed as to produce a strong barrier but rather one that emerges from improvisational strategies that reinscribe or shed/mutate the markers of class position. It is commonly assumed that a person who crosses class boundaries in this process of social mobility remains the same as before, owing to the deep inscription of hyper-individualised accounts of agency and being (see Bunn and Lumb, 2019; Lahire 2011). This view overlooks the substantial dispositional adaptation that is undergone in order to make this transition, subsequently altering personhood (Skeggs, 2011). Agents in a familial social environment will behave with an experience of comfort and ease, whereas individuals immersed in unfamiliar environments and cultural practices will have experiences of discomfort, anxiety and confrontation. 'Working-class' and marginalised groups more broadly have been shown to experience a sense of 'shame' (Burke, 2017) and 'guilt' (Bunn, Bennett and Burke, 2019) that are strongly classed and gendered (Loveday, 2016).

This speaks to the importance of social class understood as relating to the dispositional constitution of agents, not as a homology but as having a dispositional threshold that makes membership of a given class possible. In contrast to habitus 'types' (cf. Bunn, 2016), dispositional thresholds function as a critical mass of 'echoes' of practice – dispositions that are never 'dormant' but continually active in the shaping of the present agential condition – that can be adapted to new class positions through an array of strategies, including concealing social histories (e.g. Gagnon, 2018). Moreover, these function as upper and lower thresholds of *recognition* that legitimate social position through both members of the class being able to know and recognise an agent as belonging while recognisable as belonging to a different social class, whether superior or inferior (Bourdieu, 1986).

These conditions become *fuzzier,* blurrier, in friction points, where forms of class are being *made*, contested and enforced. Higher education thus has emerged as a key site for this making, contestation and enforcement of class boundaries. This paper thus aims to begin building a program for class analysis aimed at recognising class in its emergence in higher education.

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