Bread and Roses
Voices of Australian Academics from the Working Class

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Bread and Roses is an Australian first, a collection of stories from academics who identify as coming from working-class backgrounds. At once inspiring and challenging, the collection demonstrates how individual narratives are both personal and structural, in that they illustrate the ways in which social forces shape individual lives. Central themes in the book are generational changes in university education provision in Australia, the complexities of coming from a working class background and being female, or coming from a working class background and being female and a recent migrant, and the particular challenges facing students and staff from rural and regional areas.

An essential read for anyone interested in widening participation programs in higher education, including administrators, academics, past and present students, Bread and Roses is both a map for those who want to undertake a similar journey and a community for those who want to join.
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No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where one reposes,  
But a sharing of life’s glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!  
—James Oppenheimer, 1911

Oppression works from the bottom up and works not by mobilising people  
to heroic effort, as with Bolshevism and Nazism, but by rendering them  
intellectually, culturally and politically inert.  
—Arran Gare, 2012

In many ways class is an ‘invisible topic’ in Australia as it is in America. One possible  
explanation is that the Weberian-inspired expression ‘socio-economic status’ has  
replaced the once popular ‘class’ in contemporary discourse. Another is that we share  
the American illusion that everyone is middle-class now (Christopher, 2009). As well,  
the class conflict and resultant periods of sustained class analysis during the 1910s,  
1940s and 1970s (Connell, 1975) have given way to much needed intersectional  
analyses of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. However, whereas these categories  
of difference are now rightly recognised as differences, class differences continue to  
be seen as ‘better or worse “taste”’ (Jensen cited by Christopher, 2009: xviii; also  
see Michell, 2011). And although racism is generally regarded as intolerable, and  
sexism and homophobia regularly challenged—and again, rightly so—tellingly the  
term ‘classism’—which refers to the generally low social esteem in which those who  
have limited access to a decent income and occupation are held (Bletsas & Michell,  
2014)—does not yet exist in the Macquarie Dictionary. Nevertheless, it is routine  
for classist attacks to be made against people from such backgrounds. For example,  
assumptions are made that they have neither the capacity nor desire to achieve high  
levels of education, even at the Federal Government policy level and in a way that  
is unimaginable today if speaking of women or Indigenous Australians (Bletsas & Michell,  
2014). As in America, working-class people are stereotyped as ‘rude,  
uncouth, illogical, loud, disruptive, etc.’ (Christopher, 2009: 107), mocked and  
called classist names like ‘bogan’ or ‘feral’ without a second thought and without  
criticism or condemnation. Indeed, as Christopher Scanlon (2014) suggests, it is  
preferrable to use the word ‘bogan’ rather than expose the myth of egalitarianism as  
just that, a myth.
Despite the illusion of middle-classness, since 2009 there has been considerable Federal Government investment in recruiting students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. (Although it is not clear in policy documents, the category of low SES overlaps with that of working class because of the latter’s association with trades and labouring occupations, many of which are poorly paid and poorly regarded.) This investment resulted from what is now known as the ‘Bradley Review’. During the 1990s scholars had already noted the considerable progress being made with increasing numbers of women undertaking university degrees (see for example DeBats & Ward, 1998), but they pointed to dispiriting results for the other Australian equity groups, especially those from Aboriginal, rural and poor backgrounds—findings since borne out by the 2008 Bradley Review. The continuing under-representation of students from such backgrounds prevailed despite earlier reforms to the sector, including the abolition of university fees by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1974, and most of which have been made with the aim of increasing equity and widening participation because of the widespread association between education and social as well as economic mobility (DeBats & Ward, 1998; Bletsas & Michell, 2014).

While we welcome past and current efforts to broaden participation of under-represented students at university, we note that similar efforts are not being made to ensure that all equity groups are represented on staff, women being a notable, albeit unachieved, exception. In recent years we have seen warranted and considerable progress with regard to the representation of Indigenous Australians on staff, or at least the topic is now on the agenda; but to our knowledge no Australian university actively seeks to have 25 per cent of its staff come from low SES backgrounds, even as Bradley Review-prompted Federal Government financial incentives from 2009 have seen most institutions actively recruiting more students from that demographic and working towards the representative target of 25 per cent. Nor, as Brook and Michell (2012) have noted, did the gratifying post-Bradley institutional and scholarly attention to recruitment and transition of students from poor and working-class backgrounds call for recognition of the contribution that might be made by academics from similar backgrounds by making their experiences known. Instead there is an invidious silence, likely evidence of the classism that pervades Australian society and therefore universities as well (Bletsas & Michell, 2014). And yet, and inevitably given widening participation programs, there are many Australian academics who do identify as coming from those same demographics now actively been ‘mined’ for students.

Into the prevailing calm and widespread oppressive view that academics are unquestionably from the middle class, have quietly come a few assorted individual academics writing explicitly about their working-class backgrounds. For example, Bernard Smith’s (1984, 2002) memoirs of his childhood in foster care as a ward of the (NSW) State describe how he moved from the extreme margins of social life as an illegitimate child and State ward to the centre, becoming known as ‘the father of Australian art history’ (Palmer, 2012: 17). Smith benefited from early
INTRODUCTION

widening participation programs, the ‘studentships’ that Georgina Tsolidis in this volume writes about, as well as changes the University of Sydney made in 1945 when they revised entry requirements to the Faculty of Arts, changes which enabled Smith and many returned soldiers to access the university (Smith, 2002: 146). Mark Peel (1995: 1) told something of his working-class story in the introduction to his history of Elizabeth, the ‘northern badlands, the slum’, the working-class suburb in Adelaide where he (and also Heather Fraser in this volume) grew up, ‘a place made poor’ and derided by others. Peter McIlvene (2007: 307) was no stranger to derision either, writing of this experience while exploring the transition to his current status as psychologist and academic. Tara Brabazon (2004: 41) mentions almost in passing the benefits of being in the first generation of her family at university because her parents had the practical skills she needed for building shelves to house her many books. Apart from these and other individual stories (also see Brook, 2011; Michell, 2011; Wilson, 2013), the only collection of self-narratives we are aware of is Mary Ann Bin-Sallik’s assemblage of stories from Aboriginal women (2000). These were pioneering women who, for the most part, were first in their families at university, and who in fact were born in an era when education for Indigenous Australians was actively discouraged. In contrast to Australia, there is a well-established American tradition that has provided a number of such classic collections in the United States (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Dews & Law, 1995; Shepard, McMillan, & Tate, 1998; Welsch, 2005).

With this volume we counter the continuing silence with the force and fluency that is Bread and Roses, an Australian first, a collection of self-narratives, stories from academics who identify as coming from working-class backgrounds. To paraphrase Tillie Olsen (2003), we wanted to bring together in one volume a collection of stories that would shatter the silence noted by Brook and Michell. We set out to explicitly encourage those from poverty and working-class backgrounds to write about their own experiences, to read stories from others from similar backgrounds, and to encourage students of all backgrounds to do likewise. An edited collection such as this provides an opportunity for ‘people in exile… to use the autobiographic “I”, and tell the stories of their life’ (Steedman, 1986: 16), the personal having long been regarded as ‘suspect in “serious” works of scholarship’ (Dews, 1995: 5), evidence of differences in ‘taste’ that Bourdieu (2010: 4) sees as ‘one of the most vital stakes’ in the struggles between ‘the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production’ because it is not recognised as produced by social conditions. Indeed, Bob Pease in this collection writes about the difficulties he has encountered when injecting his writing with the active and subjective rather than the passive and formulaic.

In other words, and as Carolyn Law says was achieved with This Fine Place, we wanted to build a community of academics from the working class whereby those writing and reading the collection could ‘recognize their own experiences, difficulties, questionings, sufferings’ (Bourdieu, 2004: 113). We received more than double the number of responses we could hope to include in Bread and Roses,
evidence that the time is right to build such a community, that others desire to participate in one, and from which can come, as Brook and Michell (2012: 589) have argued, ‘maps for those who might want to travel … a similar journey themselves.’ As American Renny Christopher (2009) puts it on the dedication page to her book, ‘It’s all about knowing you’re not alone.’ These moments of recognition, moments of no longer feeling alone, are what Bourdieu, the most popular theorist amongst our contributors, might call ‘one of those movements of sympathy obscure to itself that are rooted in the affinity of habitus’ (2004: 27).

Despite the injection of the subjective, in reading the stories of others, and in writing one’s own, attention is drawn away from personal inadequacies and toward the structural forces of class (and gender, and race/ethnicity). That is, the stories are both personal and structural, in that they illustrate the ways in which social forces shape individual lives (Christopher, 2009). As with the American collections analysed by Brook and Michell (2012) we observe the absence of ‘fairy tale’ success stories. Many contributors do not want to claim such a ‘success story’ for themselves at all, but instead question this and the egalitarian myth, in the process highlighting difficulties and injuries inflicted by the class system (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Indeed, seeing academic work, or achieving a PhD, as a success when others are not seen as a success for their work in working-class jobs is ‘classism on top of class structure’ (Christopher, 2009: 140). Rather, writers in our collection, as in the American ones, note the difficulties (as well as the pleasures) they experience, the feelings of ambivalence and displacement, of being torn between previous and current class locations. They provide evidence of what Bourdieu calls a cleft habitus (2004: 100) which for him came from working in the upper-class academic environment yet being from ‘low social origin.’ Others also speak of the sense of alienation that can come from moving from one cultural setting to another of which Richard Rodriguez (1987: 78) so eloquently wrote, and yet, ironically, it was this cultural separation from his parents caused by education which eventually enabled Rodriguez to write about the experience. Alienation from one’s childhood culture, and often from a culture which emphasises sharing, togetherness, spontaneity and passion (Rodriguez, 1982; Steedman, 1986; Childers, 2005) rather than individual accomplishment and effort, often results in that culture being rejected. Later reclamation of childhood culture therefore raises the question of whether we are ‘learning’ when we are being educated, or whether we are being assimilated into the middle class (Christopher, 2009). After all, as Tara Brabazon (2002) says: ‘To succeed in formal education is not a question of being gifted, bright or exceptional; it is a matter of being able to repeat dominant assumptions about language, knowledge and value in a way recognised by the dominant order.’ Moreover, while there is a dominant myth that those academics from poor and working-class backgrounds automatically transition (or are assimilated) to the middle class (Brook & Michell, 2012), as a number of writers in this volume discuss, the transition is not that smooth, easy or inevitable.

As the first collection of its kind in Australia, Bread and Roses highlights a number of issues that merit further examination. These include the particular and
significant effects of being both working class and female, working class and of immigrant background. For some women it was preferable to identify with one or more of the categories of difference mentioned above than it was to claim a working-class background; for others like May Ngo, being from a migrant background is synonymous with being from a working-class background. It is to be hoped that subsequent works by others may be inspired by the individual examples recounted here to follow up with extensive studies of such experiences. But there is a further aspect of the working-class-to-academic transition that is not specifically addressed, in a comparative sense, in any of the self-narratives collected in this volume, yet is an implied theme in a number of them; it is the issue of generations—that is, when the individual entered the academy, and the significance of timing in relation to access.

In 1988 John Dawkins, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training in the Labor government of Bob Hawke, set in place the ‘Unified National System’ of tertiary education institutions, which aimed to amalgamate the dual post-secondary structure comprising the universities, so called, and the colleges of advanced education (CAE) that included the major technical colleges such as Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) as well as a large number of lesser institutions with similar industry and trade connections (Bessant, 2002). Ironically given later changes, CAEs had initially been established in 1967 at the recommendation of the Martin Committee in part to solve the problem of the high dropout and failure rates of first-year students who were ill-prepared for university. The CAEs would educate future teachers, a profession then in demand, and the universities could focus on their research programs and on admitting the academic elite (Sherington & Forsyth, 2012). Dawkins’ ‘reforms’ of the sector, twenty years on, arose in large part from a doctrinaire Labor preoccupation with perceived inequities in the tertiary sector based in the nature and managerial structure of the universities, which were seen as not only elitist bastions of intellectual class-privilege, but also venues of financial wastage. The CAEs, by comparison, were more acceptable ideologically as well as being structured on ‘managerialist’ lines that supposedly ensured far greater economic efficiencies (Bessant, 2002).

At a stroke, the changes that came to be known as the ‘Dawkins reforms’ effectively levelled the playing field, as it were, in two ways: they bestowed on the CAEs the right to rebadge as ‘universities’ without changing anything about their internal structure, intellectual culture, teaching and research priorities, or managerial style. Many of these institutions duly renamed themselves accordingly. This might not in itself have been of great consequence, beyond devaluing in many eyes the prestige associated with the label ‘university’, but for the other strand of Dawkins’ changes, whereby the administration of the entire tertiary sector, including the institutions’ internal arrangements, was to reflect the CAEs’ ‘top-down’ managerialist culture (Bessant, 2002).

This paradigm shift—it was nothing less—in Australian universities’ financial and administrative culture led, over the subsequent decade, to the conditions prevailing today for academics, and justifies reference, when discussing academic narratives as
this book does, to ‘pre-Dawkins’ or ‘post-Dawkins’. Those who entered the academy prior to the late 1980s enjoyed a degree of intellectual freedom—that is, freedom to teach, research, and/or simply think (80) —that is little more than a distant memory in the modern academic ambience of fully quantifiable research and educational outcomes, increasing workloads and output accountability (Wilson, 2015; Wilson et al., 2010).

When speaking of long academic careers still under way or only recently ended, as a number of our authors do, the pre-Dawkins era may be deemed to have begun in the decade after the Second World War. It can be broadly divided into two phases: the period dominated from the late 1940s to the early 1970s by the conservative governments of Robert Menzies and his successors; and the period begun in 1972 with the election of Gough Whitlam’s reformist Labor Government.

Menzies, a strongly education-oriented prime minister and a staunch advocate of academic freedom and merit-based opportunity (within the context of an undeniably elitist tertiary system), inherited and built upon a university funding model begun by his Labor predecessors aimed at improving facilities, infrastructure and access at the tertiary level (Bessant, 2006). In the early 1960s he expanded the scheme to include secondary education, in the form of the Commonwealth scholarship scheme, which gave unprecedented numbers of capable students previously shut out by economic circumstances the opportunity to progress to tertiary education (Bessant, 2006), but which also gave rise to concern about student retention; hence the advent of the CAEs.

A number of the most senior generation of academics contributing to our collection acknowledge that their access to university rested upon the winning of Commonwealth scholarships. Whatever their respective experiences once in the academy, and however their working-class backgrounds coloured their career trajectories, the key factor in the beginning was getting through the university doors in the first place. The universities they entered in those days were exemplars of the traditional ‘elitist’ model, and by and large those working-class students who did gain access fitted that model in terms of intellectual potential—which is not to say they were all personally comfortable in that fit, nor that they endorsed such elitism. It remains a fact, however, that they were exceptional among their socio-economic peers (and hence often isolated among their fellow-university students); the Commonwealth scholarship scheme actually benefitted relatively few in the working class, as most young people in that stratum did not complete secondary school.

In early 1974, after a busy first year in government in which federal aid to secondary schools was increased, Gough Whitlam implemented a key policy commitment and abolished tertiary fees altogether. Access to a university education was suddenly free for anyone who satisfactorily completed secondary school, and the Commonwealth scholarship scheme became redundant. Whitlam’s reform undoubtedly improved university access for significantly more working-class students than had the Commonwealth scholarships, as secondary retention rates had been rising since the early 1960s; but still, most of those working-class aspirants
taking advantage of the new freedom from fees went into the CAEs. Once again, it
may be said that working-class entrants to university still made up an ‘elite’ minority
of their own, and in many cases (as recounted by a number of our authors) also
experienced isolation and alienation due to their backgrounds.

The academic landscape post-Dawkins is characterised by two key factors: the
proliferation of institutions calling themselves ‘universities’ and the top-down
imposition of a ‘free-market’ approach to institutional governance, to teaching,
atd to research. This ‘corporate’ approach has resulted in a competitive drive for
education ‘customers’—that is, students—and an emphasis among research-oriented
institutions on funding-attractors—that is, grants—which both channels the work
of researchers into prescribed areas with definable and quantifiable outcomes, and
erodes collegiality within and between institutions competing for the same limited
pool of resources.

This ‘corporatisation’ has over the past two decades led inexorably to a new
elitism among Australia’s universities, based essentially on institutional wealth
and the capacity of academic staff to generate it. An ensnaring downward spiral
can overtake those universities lacking the resources and/or prestige (usually
resulting from longevity and the old binary system) needed to compete on such
terms, resulting in them becoming even less competitive and hence ever-poorer.
Such ‘lesser’ institutions tend to be found in regional areas and among the newer
universities in traditionally working-class localities.

The prevailing paradox inherent in this situation is that in an era of unprecedented
access to higher education for students of working-class backgrounds, the issue is
no longer whether one can go to university, but which university one attends. With
demand for entry to the prestigious universities at an all-time high, it is now at
least as difficult as it ever was for the majority of school-leavers from low socio-
economic backgrounds to gain places in elite institutions.

The dynamic interrelationship of class and location of origin presents in many
of the book’s narratives. As Loic Wacquant has argued (1997), location defines its
residents, their social networks and ultimately their opportunities, so that a class
doesn’t so much ‘create’ the location and its characteristics as much as the reverse:
the location creates the class. For many of our authors, locational disadvantage
has been an additional stumbling block when it comes to attending university, but for our
small number of authors from rural and regional centres, it presents as a particularly
acute problem. For some, it is an ongoing struggle. Choosing education and career
over one’s place of ‘belonging’ is a burden just as it is for those many students
who must leave their homes and families to attend university. Sometimes the loss of
community is overlain with a sense of guilt at having been lucky enough to get out,
while others are left behind.

Our authors from rural and regional backgrounds mostly grew up in a period of
economic decline in these centres. Increasing corporate domination of agriculture,
globalisation and de-industrialisation from the 1980s contributed to a growing
disparity of income between rural/regional and metropolitan Australians so that by
the late 1990s, workers within these centres were earning on average 24 per cent less than metropolitan Australians, and of the thirty-seven poorest electorates in Australia, thirty-three were in rural and regional areas. Rural and regional Australians still fare worst on all social and economic indicators (Saunders & Wong, 2014). The rural youth suicide rates remain alarmingly high, and at the time that our rural and regional contributors were leaving home to attend University, the rates for young men aged between fifteen and twenty-four years were fifty times higher than for their metropolitan equivalents. The research shows that causes are linked to rising rural unemployment, declining populations, the disintegration of rural communities, lack of social supports, economic challenges to the male role of breadwinner, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair (Cheers & Clarke, 2003).

A recent survey of rural and regional students from years 10–13 reveals that getting to university means getting out (Robinson, 2012), but it remains a difficult hurdle to jump. Research consistently reveals the specific disadvantages that rural and regional students must overcome to gain an equal footing with students in metropolitan areas when they begin their first year of university. Rural and regional areas have difficulty attracting, retaining and training teachers, which often leads to poor educational outcomes for students. Students also experience reduced subject options in their high school years, leading to limited degree choices (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009: 57). Coupled with a reduced quality of education is a prevailing lack of cultural acceptance or encouragement of tertiary education. The sluggish economies within these regions may only present students with a limited range of career role-models, and for that reason university education may appear unattractive or unnecessary (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009).

The recent spread of universities into large regional centres can also be seen as beneficial for rural and regional students, offering options close to home or within a similar rural/regional setting. As discussed above, the 2009 Federal Labor Government, prompted by the Bradley Review, set equity targets to increase the participation of under-represented groups within the Higher Education sector, not only low SES students, but also rural and regional students and Indigenous students. Regional universities were seen as potential vehicles for addressing the education needs of all three groups, but they often replicate the disadvantages associated with rural and regional high-school education. The limited courses offered at these institutions tend to be focused at the lower end of the professional scale: nursing, social work and teaching courses—in which women are numerically dominant—now proliferate in the educational landscape and reinforce intergenerational low earnings (Robinson, 2012). Rather than completely eliminate the binary system which had existed until the Dawkins reforms, it seems that CAEs have effectively been transplanted to regional areas.

Complexities of class and other intersectionalities, including rurality, are explored in Bread & Roses, and thus the collection promises to stimulate a wide and deep conversation about inequities in the university sector as well as the broader Australian community. The book is divided into four parts.
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The theme which unifies the seven chapters in Part One is the problematic nature of identity as one moves from the working class into the middle-class academic environment, further complicated for some contributors by intersections of ethnicity and gender. In Part Two, Alternative Pathways are stories in which the focus is on coming to higher education after a period in the workforce and disenchantment with that alternative to higher education. The small, but important, Part Three illuminates the particularities of being not only first in family at university, but also from a rural background. And the focus in the final Part Four is the academic working environment where some contributors describe disconcerting encounters with the remnants of tradition, elitism and disparagement of the working class as well as the pleasures of academic life.

‘From little things big things grow’ as Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody wrote in 1991. We hope that Bread and Roses will be the beginning of a vocal community of Australian working-class academics proudly (re)claiming their heritage, supporting students from similar backgrounds, and continuing to transform the university sector.

REFERENCES


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PART 1
IDENTITY
The city I live in now, Paris, is a city of bakeries. The baguette is as much an icon as the Eiffel Tower and the smell of freshly baked bread is one of the pleasures of this city. Walking along the streets you’ll find bakeries within metres of one another, each servicing the needs of local residents for bread, patisseries and other baked goods. In summer, as Parisians leave for their vacances (holidays) and Paris nearly shuts down, the local mayor’s office publishes a list of which local bakeries will be open and when, making sure locals don’t suffer bread deprivation while the bakers are away on holiday.

Used to white sliced bread in Australia, I never knew bread could be so good or so various. You have the ‘standard’ baguette, but also traditional baguettes, seeded baguettes, walnut bread, focaccia and cheese sticks. And the patisseries, aah, who can forget the patisseries! In such a visually conscious city, you won’t find things simply slapped together with no regard for aesthetics; like everything else here, how it looks is most important: raspberry tarts, macarons, chocolate éclairs, puff-pastry cream cakes, flan, lemon meringue tarts, croissants, pain au chocolat; an endless range all carefully decorated and arranged in the window displays. Beautifully made patisseries with always that extra bit of flourish, whether it’s a carefully placed raspberry or their bakery logo done in tiny perfect letters in icing; one can easily get lost in the beauty of it all.

It’s funny that I should be living in a city of bakeries; each time I step into a bakery it brings up so many associations for me. The bakeries in the city trace old memories of the family bakery that my siblings and I grew up in, the bakery my family had for over ten years in Sydney in a period when for some reason many migrant families, particularly Vietnamese, opened up bakeries across western Sydney. My family’s bakery would never be able to compete with the ones over here in Paris; I doubt if that many bakeries in Australia could – we simply don’t have the same level of love and passion for bread and patisseries they do here. Instead, my family’s Asian-Australian version had: lamingtons, meringues, donuts, apple turnovers, meat pies, sausage rolls, ‘French’ stick, round rolls, long rolls and, of course, white sliced bread. At one point we even tried selling Vietnamese pork rolls (banh mi thit); themselves a leftover from French colonial influence: a bread roll with paté, processed pork slices, shredded carrots and shallots.
The smell of baking bread, the texture of dough and heat from the industrial oven lives on in the cells of my body. Dad did all the baking, with Mum out front selling and the kids helping out. So many memories of days spent at this bakery that was literally our second home: some weekends sleeping over at the shop so that my parents could wake up early enough to bake the bread, days spent helping in the back with Dad; greasing bread tins, making the cakes and cleaning up, or selling out the front with Mum. Memories also of playing handball in the parking lot with my sisters and brother when we had nothing to do, buying fish and chips at the local takeaway shop, playing cards out the back and spending hot summers during school holidays there.

I remember one particular afternoon minding the shop alone while my parents were sleeping out the back; the heat was dissipating as I looked out of the shop window, watching the sun set. It was one of those brilliant Sydney summer afternoons, like being in a permanent photo shoot where the light is dazzling, and at its most dazzling just before sun is about to set. There were no customers, no one around. I saw a man ride by on a bike, catching the wind as he sped along. The image of that man on his bike sparked off a yearning; on one level simply a childish longing to be able to spend my school holidays doing something fun, but on another a sense of longing to be free of all this, of the burden of being tied down to this life we had, and yes of being tied down by my family. Hoping that one day I’d be as free as that man on the bike.

The shop was open seven days a week all year round, only closed for one (sometimes two) days on Chinese New Year. My parent’s reasoning was that if they closed even one day too many, customers would start going to another bakery; I wonder how my parents would have coped with the different work ethic and legal restrictions around opening hours here in France. And they’ve paid the price for this overworking. Eyes ruined by overexposure to the ovens, daily sixteen hour days, years of prolonged sleep deprivation and physical labour. I grew up watching my parents’ bodies deteriorate. Particularly my Dad, who undertook most of the strenuous hard labour, some days working from 3am until the close of the shop at 8pm, and who had to be hospitalized more than once. I remember the first time he had to go to hospital; the shock of seeing him collapsing on the floor, vomiting blood. Dad always said that staying in hospital was like a holiday for him, where he could sleep as much as he wanted and didn’t have to do anything. Bread, flour, dough; I always felt the customers were eating his blood and sweat.

The family bakery is a typical migrant story. The shops in the street of migrant areas are full of these stories; ours is not unique. The struggle of making a life in a new country follows directly on from the struggle and trauma of getting here in the first place. But it doesn’t lessen the heartbreak of this particular story or of their particular struggle. Or lessen the burden of their sacrifice. My Dad has said that whatever they experience here in Australia is nothing compared to what they endured before; that everything after that is easy, and if not easy at least bearable.
I carry this sacrifice around my neck like a heavy anchor that ties me down to shore, that ties me to my family, that ties me finally to the need for redemption: a need to redeem myself for being able to live the life they never had – through my parents’ sacrifices and chance/fate/luck I’m able to live this particular life, while being aware that many others do not. A privileged life that I could never take as a given no matter how much I associate with middle-class people and their norms; where it’s not only taken for granted but not even seen as a privilege; for whom it is simply a natural entitlement.

As a child of migrant parents from Cambodia and Vietnam, education was emphasised as a way to a better life, as a way out of what my parents had to endure. The focus was on getting an easier life, a physically easy job. In this vein, even though my parents did not really have the money or time to take me to things that I wanted to do like piano or dance classes, money was spent on extra maths tutoring and Chinese lessons on Saturdays, the entire Encyclopaedia Britannica (this was before the time of the internet) which we never really used, and being allowed as many books and trips to the public library as we wanted. The greatest gift that came out of my parents’ expectations for us from education was how it developed my love of reading and books. I devoured children’s books, moving on to teen fiction, memorising whole passages from the Babysitters Club books, reading all of the Narnia books, reading everything I could get my hands on. Books opened up a whole new world; in it I was able to be other people, travel, feel other feelings. They also gave comfort. With books I knew that someone, somewhere had experienced what I had, if only I was able to find the right book, the right author. It would be a love that I would carry my whole adult life, and it would be the thing that saved me. As an adult I would later discover Shakespeare in a public library, and finally Simone Weil, French philosopher, labour activist and Christian mystic, perhaps the single writer who has changed my life.

Public libraries are a great equalizer, but there also has to be a culture around the child that encourages reading and learning, which I was lucky enough to have. And it probably developed my intellectual tendencies and interests too. When I got to university to do a Bachelor of Arts degree, though, there were certain moments of my time there that highlighted to me why I couldn’t feel completely at ease in this world, why it wasn’t my world – especially in the social sciences and humanities. Things like turning up to a class on South-East Asian culture and the lecturer being a white man talking about these cultures as though they were objects, feeling sickened because Why was he an expert on what was essentially people’s lives, on my family’s lives? It was similar to the punch in the stomach I had felt in high school, when the History teacher arranged for an Australian Vietnam veteran to come in and give a talk about his experiences of the Vietnam War. It struck me that the teacher did not think to ask the students who came from predominately migrant backgrounds about their experiences of war; that she did not see that she had a class full of students from a migrant background whose families had stories of the Vietnam War that they could have shared. Furthermore, during his talk the Vietnam veteran said that he would be
M. NGO

happy whenever a bomb dropped on North Vietnam (the Communists). My father had fought on the Communist side; and even as an adolescent I was shocked at how the veteran could not discern the fact that civilians would be affected, or that there might be people in the classroom whose families who were on the ‘other side’. And I was shocked, too, that there was no questioning of the validity of going to intervene in another country.

It was also at university where I got crushes on my Sociology lecturers, wishing that they were my parents instead; that I could be part of their world. I imagined dinner time around the kitchen table, when I’d be able to siphon knowledge from them, be introduced to a world of critical analysis and learning. To escape from the world I knew, of hard physical labour and of the gains of that labour, the loneliness of the suburbs. Pristine cut lawns each segregated and perfectly aligned to show off to everyone else what you have. It’s the sin of the aspiring middle class. Choosing to do Arts and majoring in Sociology was not unproblematic either – I remember that my parents, and indeed anyone in my extended family who asked what I was doing, could not understand when I told them. Could not understand exactly what it was, nor what it was useful for, especially in terms of future career prospects. I think my parents comforted themselves with the fact that at least I was going to university.

A particularly painful memory for me: my grandfather dying in Liverpool hospital, passing between consciousness and unconsciousness. In one of his moments with me, he asked what I was studying at university, and I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t translate ‘Sociology’ into our Chinese dialect, and my limited language skills didn’t include being able to describe what it was. Also, I knew that he was thinking along the lines of something ‘useful’ and in terms of a career, rather than something as wishy-washy as Sociology. I ummed and aahed and felt ashamed and embarrassed, and couldn’t reply to his question. Nevertheless, after he had died and when I finally graduated from university with my Bachelors degree, my Dad presented me with a pen my grandfather had given to him, with instructions to give it to me when I graduated. I broke into pieces.

The point I want to make is that for my life, I can’t separate being from a migrant background and being working class; indeed the two do not have to be mutually exclusive but instead illustrate the varieties of the working-class experience. I want to do away with the stereotype that working class automatically means white and ‘bogan’.

And what does it mean to be ‘working class’ in an academic environment? It is to understand that they are two vastly different cultures. To know in your bones, from your life experiences, that to be working class and academic, particularly, rather ironically, in the social sciences and humanities, reveals a world of a difference between the two. Something that may be invisible to others but which colours everything you see, that informs your trajectory through life, including that of an intellectual, professional career. As the writer Raymond Carver (1990) said:
In other lives, people don’t succeed at what they try to do, at the things they want most to do. I think most of my characters would like their actions to count for something. But at the same time they’ve reached the point – as so many people do – that they know it isn’t so. It doesn’t add up any longer … And usually they do know it, I think, and after that they just do the best they can.

In his short stories Carver portrays the precariousness of life that some people live with, speaks of desires continually checked in place despite living in a society that says you could (and should) have all of these things if you only worked hard enough, hard enough to achieve the American (and Australian) dream. He effectively evokes the everyday low-grade despair that buzzes in the background of many working-class lives. At its best, it is an enduring. It is to feel the heavy weight of the need for money, of constantly having to think about it and how you will pay for things. Not just any things, but basic necessities – rent, food, bills. A constant anxiety about how you will manage and a limitation on the future. Someone said that when you have money, you never think about it. And when you don’t, all you do is think about it.

I’ve come to realise over the past couple of years that class is probably the single most fundamental thing that has shaped my identity – my assumptions, perceptions and judgments. Although I may be moving away from my class background as I enter academia, more than other factors, such as gender, race/ethnicity or sexuality, it is at the crux of my identity, for better or worse the lens through which I see everything. Also, though I may be moving away from my class by being in academia, the global widening gap between rich and poor means that it is a highly precarious middle class in which no jobs are guaranteed, and, as in all other sectors, casualisation of labour and job insecurity are dominant. I don’t have a trust fund to fall back on, or parents who can pass something on to me.

In conclusion, it is my class background that has made the difference. And I don’t mean only in terms of opportunities; there is also a difference in life experiences and what you learn to expect from life. But all of this is abstract and intangible, and therefore easy to dismiss. Class is invisible and decidedly not sexy in academia – unlike race and gender. But coming from a working-class background gives us a unique perspective and viewpoint from which to see academic and intellectual work in general. Academia being a predominately middle-class domain means that people who come from non-middle-class backgrounds are needed even more to provide different perspectives and to enrich (challenge?) the academic and research agenda. This is critical if intellectual work is actually to change things rather than being merely an insulated, ego-driven activity, as it so often is.

And how does having a working-class background influence what I do now at university? Well, it’s not a coincidence that the context of my PhD thesis is migration, specifically sub-Saharan African migration in Morocco. However, it is also not by accident that I have chosen not to work directly within the migration context that my family and I come from. At the moment that would be too painful. However,
whatever I decide to do in the future, I know that I could never not write about class in some way. It would be a betrayal, not only of my background but of myself. I want to always write from my gut, from where it hurts, from what has made me who I am. For me, it is my class background. It will always be a part of me. Because like Raymond Carver, I am and always will be a ‘fully paid-up member of the working class’.

REFERENCE


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2. I DIDN’T WORK FOR IT

The Acquisition of an Academic Habitus
(Or How a Working-Class Kid Got a Middle-Class Job)

My first real job, when I left university (the first time), was teaching science and mathematics in a Catholic high school in Perth. Shortly after taking up this position, I came to a slightly shocking revelation: I was making more money than my dad, a man who had been working full-time in a variety of jobs since he left school, when he was fifteen years old.

Thirty-five years later, here was his twenty-two-year-old firstborn, articulating this reality: ‘Hey Dad, I’ve realised lately that I’m earning more than you do’.

A slightly awkward silence ensued, which I quickly filled by adding, ‘It doesn’t seem fair, after all the years you have been out there’.

‘Oh, no’, replied my old man, his Northern English tones still very evident despite our ten years in Australia, ‘you’ve worked for it’.

I was perplexed and probably showed it, but that was the last (and only) time we ever spoke about our earnings.

I didn’t work for it, not if work means something hard-gained. As I reflected on what my father had to say (and by this point in my education I was referring to him as ‘father’ rather than Dad) about what had been a very ordinary first degree, I realised that there was nothing else I wanted to do. I couldn’t have worked in a bank, and that did seem like the only other option, given my almost complete ignorance of and lack of interest in all things manual. In going to uni and becoming a teacher I did what came ‘naturally’ to me.

I am an anthro-sociologist these days and know that nothing comes naturally. I was not born to this academic life; I took to it. In reflecting upon becoming and being an academic from a ‘non-traditional background’, I want to trace the movements into the academy of a working-class lad and his acquisition of a middle-class habitus. With obvious reference to Berger and Luckman’s notions of the social construction of reality (1967), and Bourdieu’s theories of practice (1977), I draw upon familiar and important tropes of the disciplines I have been socialised into, in order to better comprehend the shifts in behaviour, and in the practices of self, that this movement necessarily entailed and continues to entail. In short, I want to trace the cultured, structured agency driving my biography.

D. Michell et al. (Eds.), Bread and Roses, 9–17.
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The tale told identifies the challenges faced by a working-class lad finding his way in a socially alien world, the ways in which this has affected my academic practice, and some of the reactions and responses this has evoked. Some of these reactions and responses arise in the self, reflecting the ‘hidden injuries of class’ so famously invoked by Sennett and Cobb (1973). But this is not a story of battle and hurt; it is a much more prosaic tale of getting by and making do, albeit with some degree of ambition and drive.

EARLY AMBITIONS

As already hinted at, I was born in the UK, in the industrial North. It was the time of the compulsory ‘Eleven Plus’ primary school examination. So-named for the age at which it was taken, the exam was used to sort students into the their next stage of schooling – grammar school, secondary modern, or trade school. I cannot recall any particular feelings about this exam as I approached it but I do recall taking it upon myself to take a separate scholarship examination to attend the poshest school in my local area. I have no idea where this particular ambition came from, but my parents dutifully drove me to the school one Saturday morning and in I went along with many more boys – it was a single-sex school – to take on a task for which only two of us could succeed – or at least this is my memory of what I was facing.

Much to my mother’s relief, I did not get the scholarship: ‘We couldn’t have afforded the uniform,’ she told me many years later. However, I did pass the examination to go to a Catholic boys’ grammar school some fifteen kilometres from our home, a distance that seemed so great at that time. I did not set any academic records at St Anselms, and I cannot say that the education set me alight in any way, but I enjoyed sport and was good at it. Interestingly, despite being populated by large numbers of scholarship students like myself who grew up playing soccer on the streets around us, we were only allowed to play rugby – as the old aphorism goes, ‘a ruffian’s game played by gentlemen’. Rugby was very much the game of the establishment in those days, although interestingly at the ‘posh school’ I visited on a Saturday morning, boys were playing soccer, albeit not very well if what I saw on that occasion was anything to go by. For the upper classes, the game of distinction is already won; they can play whatever they like.

I attended St Anselms for a year, before my family migrated to Australia. We arrived shortly after the Whitlam Labor Government was elected. We did not realise the educational significance of this event, but our continued commitment to Catholic education was being eased by agreements negotiated at that time to fund all schools as a matter of justice. For much of the twentieth century, Catholic schooling in Australia was working-class education. It offered some hope of upward mobility, but was poorly resourced. By the time I hit my final years of schooling the religious orders had more or less run out of their particular, and often peculiar, form of voluntary labour and the Catholic schools were employing lay teachers, many under-qualified. Some of the classes I attended were led by people demonstrating
limited knowledge of their subject. I did have a number of very fine and dedicated educators, but it is fair to say that I and my fellow students were not as well prepared as we might have been for university entrance examinations. Of course, this was not simply because of teachers; a lack of preparedness by students to do the requisite work also contributed. I include myself among those who ensured the classroom was a place of distraction and disruption.

I did pass the examinations and qualified for the ‘establishment’ University of Western Australia, and I am still there. When I received the letter telling me I had passed, I was instructed to ring my grandmothers in England to let them know. I recall standing in a phone box while Dad’s mum wept at the news. ‘You’re the first one,’ she cried, and she cried and I held the phone awkwardly to my ear, not knowing what to say or do. It was exciting for me, but it did not seem that big a deal.

STUMBLING INTO UNIVERSITY – THE FIRST TIME

I enrolled in a BSc programme at the University of Western Australia in the late 1970s. It was not my first choice, but I simply did not get the requisite marks to enter the Veterinary Science programme on offer elsewhere. I did not think very much about my movement into the degree programme. I really did not know what I was doing. I had vague notions of doing well in first year and transferring out into Veterinary Science, and of studying pathology if I did not. I did not know what the study of pathology was, and never attempted to find out. Perhaps this was a ‘personality trait’, but it was also linked to the ‘lacks’ associated with being the first in the family to go to university.

I recall a maths class focused on computer programming. I did not understand a word of it. I fronted up at a tutorial with my first attempted program. The tutor took one look, commenting immediately, ‘This is not about writing in English.’ I mumbled something about knowing this, but, I asked, ‘Well, what is it?’

‘It’s not English,’ was repeated, and I left the tutorial room defeated. I promptly shifted my enrolment to more familiar mathematical territory.

Another learning incident sticks in my memory. I was studying Zoology for the first time in my life – I had taken Physics and Chemistry in high school – and was not comprehending the lectures on neuro-anatomy. I went to the library determined to address this lack, but again found myself out of my depth, unable to make out what the text was telling me about electrical potentials, ion transfer and so on. I left the library quite deflated, wanting to understand, but not knowing how to do it, not by myself. There did not seem to be anywhere else, or anyone else, I could turn to.

I did not understand how the system worked. I needed more structured learning in that first year. On top of that, I was a late teen trying to find a social space – a desire, a need, even, that took over most of my academic intent. This was especially apparent in my second year, which I only just survived academically.

I had returned to playing rugby, which was still the establishment sport. I revived an interest in theatre that had been more or less dormant since leaving England – in
the late 1970s Western Australia was not yet a place that encouraged young people, especially males, into theatre arts. Both were arenas of competency for me, that allowed me to ‘mix it’ with young people from the other side of those mythic tracks. The ten-year-old who was drawn to the life offered in the posh school became the youth who actively pursued the middle-class lifeworld.

Curiously, in my third year a clearer, more structured learning path opened up, and I blossomed. I had stumbled into Biochemistry by then, mainly because of not meeting prerequisites for other choices. The course was lecture-less; a radical program at the time. We had a series of workbooks to complete, each of which required the successful negotiation of a test in order to proceed to the next module. The requisite material was contained in the workbooks, which also suggested extra readings to deepen understanding. By then I had probably matured enough to understand how universities worked, but I recall the thrill of achievement these modules offered. I worked hard, read the extra texts, and achieved more than I had ever managed in my degree to that point. Whereas earlier I could not wait to get out into ‘the real world’, in that final year I developed an appetite for the academic life. By the time I finished I regretted having to leave. But leave I did – even at that point, I did not actually know what doing Honours meant, nor what it could bring me, so I did not even try to get into that programme.

STUMBLING OUT OF UNIVERSITY – AND BACK IN AGAIN

I left university with a mediocre degree in a discipline I had not heard of prior to going. I had a gap year of sorts – working in various casual jobs, including singing telegrams. I headed off to Europe and back again in time to start a diploma of education. I had decided to become a teacher, for which the Catholic network proved invaluable. Even in the 1980s I was able to get a teaching position without a full qualification. I completed my postgraduate teaching qualifications during my first three years as a teacher – part time, after school.

And it was in this course, back at my old university, that I discovered a second subject nobody told me about at school. The Sociology of Education captured my imagination, as nothing had done before. ‘It’s what I’ve been doing all my life,’ I pointed out to anyone who would listen. The subject explained me to myself, including an entirely predictable move into teaching. A plan started to form to become a sociologist. It took a few years to get there; there were a number of other things to do, but in the late 1980s I began a second degree part-time. It was in Anthropology, because as the sub-dean at UWA explained when I made the application, ‘We don’t do Sociology, we do Anthropology – but they are the same thing’. I was happy to take the credits on offer in order that I could complete my undergraduate studies as soon as possible. A PhD was my goal.

I returned to uni to do what I’d been doing all my life, to solidify it, to professionalise it, to think about it and to simply do sociology. I also went back to make up for the first time, to prove to myself that I could do it better, that I could
be smart – that I was smart. At age forty-two I reached my goal, graduating with a PhD focused on schooling and its class effects. But rather than focus on the travails of the students being failed by schools, so often the concern of anthropological and sociological accounts of schooling (Delamont, 2012), I wrote about teachers and their role in class-reproduction (Forsey, 2007).

One of the first texts I read was Paul Willis’s *Learning to Labour* (1977). Often presented as the quintessential sociological study of schooling, it portrayed a group of rebellious ‘lads’ penetrating the meritocratic veneer of schooling, and allegedly shattered ‘the image of the passive, malleable student’ implicit in the reproduction theories that held sway to that point (Levinson & Holland 1996: 9). But I was struck by the fact that Willis was not writing about those of us who apparently defied our working-class roots, who shattered images of the working classes in other ways. It is a pattern that repeats over and over in the anthro-sociology of education (Forsey, 2007), and it is the poorer for it.

**TAKING MY PLACE AT HOME**

Christine Overall (1995) in her phenomenological overview of her own experience of escape through an academic portal from the neighbourhood she grew up in and the occupational destiny her class positioning was supposed to imply, argues that the price to be paid for breaking away ‘is to be intellectually and socially “nowhere at home”’ (Overall, 1995: 219). The desert makes a significant difference to educational mobility in Australia, or at least for the Western third it does. Among those Western Australians fortunate enough to qualify for university, the vast majority attend one of the five located in the state. This reality presents a stark difference to the experiences of young people in nations where it is usual to the point of expectation to move away from home in order to go to university. The implications are profound. In a highly mobile modernity, physical movement is often associated with socio-economic mobility (see Corbett, 2009), a theme that is very apparent in the ‘academics from the working class’ literature helping to inspire this particular volume. For the middle classes, mobility associated with education is a desirable marker of growth, of development and progress (Forsey, in press). Working-class people tend to be more concerned with staying close to family, to fulfilling obligations to each other by staying close to home. As Overall (1995) helps exemplify, many of those who have already written about being an academic from the working class express varying levels of discomfort, awkwardness and sometimes even guilt about leaving their familial places, while their families oft-times express bewilderment at their drive to do so.

By the time I completed my PhD in 2002, I had been enrolled for some form of study at UWA for nineteen of the twenty-five years I had spent away from school. The university had become something of a home to me. I was lucky enough to be appointed to an academic post at UWA two years later, so I stayed at home into the next phase of my working life. ‘Not moving on’ is often construed as a problem.
in academia and among academics. I take the point about the importance of cross-fertilisation of ideas, and of gaining a range of training and experiences, but other commitments and alternative values can also be valorised. Insofar as the desert structures, or at least symbolises, a more ‘stay at home’ ethos in Australian academic life, for those for whom this matters, it is something to be grateful for.

At an early stage of my entry into the academic lifeworld, I sometimes commented to close confidants on feeling like the proverbial bull let loose in the library; there was some delicate china around, but I felt more the noise and force of my being than its clatter and damage. At the time I put this down to being more extraverted than most, but Overall’s metaphorical evocation of the ‘working-class bull in the university china shop’ (1995: 217), offers some cause for reconsideration. Drawing on ideas from Tammis Coffin (1992), Overall (1995: 216) comments on how working-class people are less committed to ‘the middle-class rules, practices and niceties that we never entirely learned or understood’, a positioning that can well result in being more direct and to the point, more expressive of feelings, than is usual in the delicate running of the china shop.

Outside of interaction with faculty colleagues, academic labour obviously involves a range of activities hinged around teaching and research. It was in the teaching that I most felt or apprehended my working-class upbringing. There are confounding variables, let’s make this absolutely clear. My age of commencement, coupled to my experiences as a high-school teacher, undoubtedly contributed to the ways in which I approached my work; nevertheless, I went into the teaching of first-year students remembering my initial experiences as a university student. I was committed to making the learning as transparently structured as possible.

It was early days in the incorporation of online technologies into teaching and learning at UWA. The first-year Anthropology & Sociology classes, which are large classes, were among the first to incorporate an online Learning Management System. I remember well an exchange that took place between three young women in the first-year class I was coordinating in those early years. Each signalled that they had attended high-fee private schools in Perth and each expressed dismay at the ways in which the unit was structured. The online conversation opened with one of the group commenting that the detailed explanations of what they were expected to do felt a lot like being back in Mrs Chambers’ English class (the name is not the original) where everything was spelled out in excruciating detail. The other two commentators readily agreed, drawing upon their own school experiences in doing so.

The feeling of having been put back in my place was inescapable. All of us who teach are vulnerable to student comments, particularly given the ways in which the assessment of teaching is carried out in the contemporary university, but this was more personal in some ways. I felt like a dunce, that I was failing a significant test of intellect. I also sensed a vulnerability to the commentary of my colleagues, hidden as it was and as unfounded as my senses may have been, to my contributing to the dumbing-down of the curriculum. The student commentary continued in this
vein for a week or so, the injuries were hidden but sorely felt, and then came an observation that closed down the thread. Made by a student who identified herself as coming from the south-eastern suburbs of Perth, a very clear marker of non-privilege, this closing comment construed what was happening in the Anthropology classroom as a sign of care: ‘At least they are taking the time to tell us what to do,’ the student pointed out, ‘which is more than I ever got at the state school I went to.’

There is much to contemplate in this story about the ways in which social class is practiced in and through educational systems. The experience of it continues to impact on my teaching practice, which has progressed to ‘flipping the classroom’ away from lectures towards various forms of symposia actively engaging students in processes of discovery and consolidation of knowledge (See Forsey, Low, & Glance, 2013). I am struck by the similarities in approach with the final-year Biochemistry class I took all those years ago that was so congenial in its student-centred structure. I am growing less apologetic about my pedagogical approach these days.

In this era of massification of tertiary education, where more and more of the barbarians have traversed the university gates, it is vital that we teach the students we have, not the students we were, or desire (Hamilton, 2012). Good pedagogy transcends social class in many ways, but I do hold in my mind the seventeen-year-old student I was. I want him to receive better opportunities to engage in university learning than he did; for him (and her) to feel more at home in these strange places.

**BEING AN ACADEMIC**

Sitting next to the framed PhD certificate pinned on the wall of my study is a photograph taken by my mother on my first day at school. I am struck most by the crumbling paint on the wall of the front of our terraced house that backgrounds the smiling lad in his blazer and shorts. In this house I prayed constantly to be somewhere else, in a house ‘with a bath stuck to the floor – please God’. The two photographic artefacts sit next to each other in my study for contemplative purposes. I know I have bucked the odds and I do draw some satisfaction from that. I also know that I am one of the lucky ones. I constantly caution students about the liberal fantasy of the self-made individual. We are all products of our upbringing, but in keeping with orthodox sociological views of our time, we know that none of what we become is ‘just so’. Individuals inscribe themselves into society, at the same time as the social structures are imposed upon each of us.

I was steered into the academy by policies created by people committed to opening up possibilities for kids born into working-class families. The grammar-school scholarship granted to me and many other twelve-year-olds of similar background in the UK was part of this post-war policy drive. Following this, my family arrived in Australia at the time that university education was starting to be offered more as a right than a privilege. Alongside guaranteeing funding for severely under-resourced Catholic schools, the Whitlam Labor Government also abolished university fees. This was the policy commitment that made the greatest difference to the likes of me,
offering access to the most significant institution of the establishment in my home
state, opening up a space that was to absorb so much of my life and providing so
many invaluable opportunities, culminating in the privileges I currently enjoy as an
academic.

And I steered myself there as well. The kid who took a shot at an unlikely
scholarship, and who had to settle for the one that was always more attainable, was
already reaching for an existence beyond the one he was born into. I still have no
idea where this ambition derived from, but it is entirely consistent with the young
man who returned to the rugby fields and the gratification of performance at the
theatres of the university. The pleasures of bourgeois creativity and the ‘amateur
spirit’ of the game for ruffians played by gentlemen attracted me much more than
those on offer down at the local pub, or on the wide spaces of the Australian Rules
football grounds I played on as a school boy, and where I showed more promise than
I ever did on the rugby fields.

In going to university I did what had become natural to me. From the limited
repertoire available to me – that is available to all of us – I became an academic much
more than I chose to be one. This path was shaped by experiences in a respectable
working-class family, by a Catholic education system focused on upward mobility
for at least some of its adherents, and a government policy landscape that was being
reshaped to allow some levels of movement for the likes of me. My being, my
habitus – which, after Bourdieu (1977), I think of as the internalised beliefs, values
and attitudes guiding the embodied decision-making that is part of our every living
moment – was shaped by these factors. It was shaped by much more of course; the
people I met on the rugby fields, for example, were significant influences in the
formation of my academic self. And the path is also idiosyncratic, shaped by my
own desires and drives to become part of the establishment, however imperfect that
belonging has turned out to be. As already indicated, I was not born to become an
academic, I took to it, and that has made all the difference.

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