

Class Strategies and the Education Market: The Middle Classes and Social Advantage

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Why are the middle class 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 p. 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. Inequalities both old and new. New forms of old inequalities and new forms of inequality. As Savage (2000 p. 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; class analysis (or social stratification), the attempt to establish and operationalise systems of class categories, 'who belongs where', which can then be used for various kinds of correlational, comparative or mobility research; and class practices, which incorporates a variety of work ranging from consumption research, work on identity, work-place studies and experiences of oppression, inequality and social reproduction. Looking from the outside in on all of this is a more recent critical tradition which explores the demise of class. 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 theorising (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. 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 realisations, of class and class reproduction I take it that class 'is something that happens (and it can be showed to have happened) in a human relationship'. 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'. 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 realised 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'. 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. 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'. Advantages in the form of capitals can be stored and accumulated for future use. In other words, I take class to be dynamic and emergent. As such reproduction is never guaranteed and mobility, up or down, is always possible. Such mobility is both contingently and strategically dependent. Here class and class inequalities are treated and 'understood dynamically', 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. This is about how class is achieved and maintained, and enacted rather than something that just is! Class is realised 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 wellbeing 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.

The book explores how middle class families seek and achieve, for the most part, social advantage through education. The analysis rests on the key concepts of social closure, social capital, risk and principles and values. This is not an empirical report but the book engages with and deploys four sets of data on 'choice' and education markets. It is specific but general, and grounded but theoretical. It attempts to take the analysis of class in education a step further.

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