



Post-Industrial and Work Class? Young People's Inequalities in Higher Education

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Living in a post-industrial society brings new challenges and risks for individuals in terms of opportunity and being faced with a newly devised economy and work environment. Post-industrial society is a radical break from what was known before, with a massive shift from manual work to a heavy employment within the service sector. Alongside this is the increased need for knowledge and the expansion of Higher Education.

This contribution looks into youth transition and the inequalities that young people may face when it comes to higher education, arguing that whilst there are more opportunities to pursue Higher Education for working class people, this also creates more risk for them than it would for middle class students. I will explore this deploying theories such as knowledge society, neoliberalism and risk society in order to highlight the inequalities reproduced within higher education in the current social climate.

Knowledge society, as Webster (2014: 9) suggests, 'is at the core of how we conduct ourselves these days'.

Knowledge therefore is arguably one of the most important features of the working world in post industrial society. Knowledge society can be understood as a rise in technology within a 'third industrial revolution' resulting in many moving into the service sector of work, a radical change from previous times (Välilmaa and Hoffman, 2008).

As there is an increase of knowledge within society, there is now a higher demand for more highly educated workers due to new professional positions in need of fulfilment. This is an expansion taking place 'simultaneously with the development of modern knowledge societies' (Välilmaa and Hoffman, 2008: 268) evolving into a phenomenon of great importance. New pathways for youths who are thinking about their transition from compulsory to the working world are arising, this change being visible among the increase of training programs.

Bell's (1973) work and contribution to the understanding of the growth in knowledge is particularly important when trying to understand the emergence of knowledge society. Professionals are at the centre of society as they are educated and therefore are equipped with the skills that a post-industrial society demands (Bell, 1973).

With this notion in mind, an overwhelming sense of obligation is put on youths to pursue Higher Education after compulsory schooling. There are greater

educational choices in the UK, however, the change in employment occupational structure in post industrial society has made it difficult for youths to predict the kinds of opportunities available to them (Schoon and Lysons, 2016).

The increase in individualisation and pressure to create your own pathway in life is something that has not been seen before. In a pre-industrial





society pathways were carved out for people based on their social status, and relatively little deviated from this status quo. These structural constraints are being broken down as we begin to understand the need for higher education, the emotional stress and risk factors for the working class start to become more evident.

Patterns within the change for youth transition therefore consists of an increase of young people participating in higher education. Of particular importance in terms of youth transformation are the changes in economic development, as employment is mostly in the service sector (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000). Success for youths seems to lie within Higher Education, with Sutton Trust (2021: n.p.) research statistics showing '35% of university graduates moved into the top fifth of earners at age 30, compared to 12% of those who hadn't attended HE'.

Neoliberal views can be illustrative when thinking about the marketisation of Higher Education as 'the assumption [is] that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market' (Harvey, 2007: 7). This could be, however, when thinking about equal opportunity and the type of university a working class individual might attend, an overly positive way of thinking.

The accessibility of Higher Education is not always as equal as widening participation schemes make out. Accessibility for disadvantaged children to the top universities proved very small in the Sutton Trust report, with only 2% of students having been eligible for free school meals in Russell group

universities compared to 11% in less selective universities (Sutton Trust, 2021).

Neoliberalism introduces fees to this "education marketplace" which brings in irrefutable competition. Although there are price caps on fees for higher education in the UK, making it a semi market not a full market, universities undoubtedly judge individuals on their economic worth. Top universities such as Oxbridge can be highly selective about who they accept following tuition fees of '£1,000 per year introduced first by the Labour Government in 1998' (Bolton and Hubble, 2020: n.p.). This is apparent in recent statistics on the economic hardship of some students at Oxford University, with 'free school meal eligible students being 100 times less likely to attend Oxbridge than someone who attended a private secondary school' (Sutton Trust, 2021: n.p.).

In addition, it is evident that a higher percentage of Russell Group graduates are going into professional jobs as opposed to those who do not

attend a Russell Group university. With 80.5% of Russell Group university graduates being in professional employment six months after graduating with only 68.9% of graduates from non-Russell Group universities (HESA, 2016). Not only does this highlight the importance of choice in relation to what university you go to but also shows clear inequality of opportunity under the illusion of free

choice. This is a clear indication that key cultural and economic challenges working class students face are being blindsided by the impression of a free market.

The successful expansion of HE to fit in a world where knowledge overpowers trade is clear. However, alongside this new sense of liberation





comes new risks, especially for the working class. In a review of Beck's notion of risk society, Risk Society, Smart (1994: 160) suggests that 'the experience of risk is synonymous with modernity'. This can be applied to the idea of increased opportunity to attend university with the synonymous experience of risk that the working class may face. Beck suggests this idea of a risk society being one that becomes self aware of the problems created due to its own actions (Beck, 1992), and by taking a leap of faith into the higher education system, working class students become increasingly more aware of the risk they face.

Tett's (2004) research into topics surrounding participation in higher education suggests choosing to undertake a pathway into higher education has become more risky and uncertain for working class students. Being a middle-class student contemplating university is much more of an easy choice, as it could be argued it is the done thing amongst the middle class.

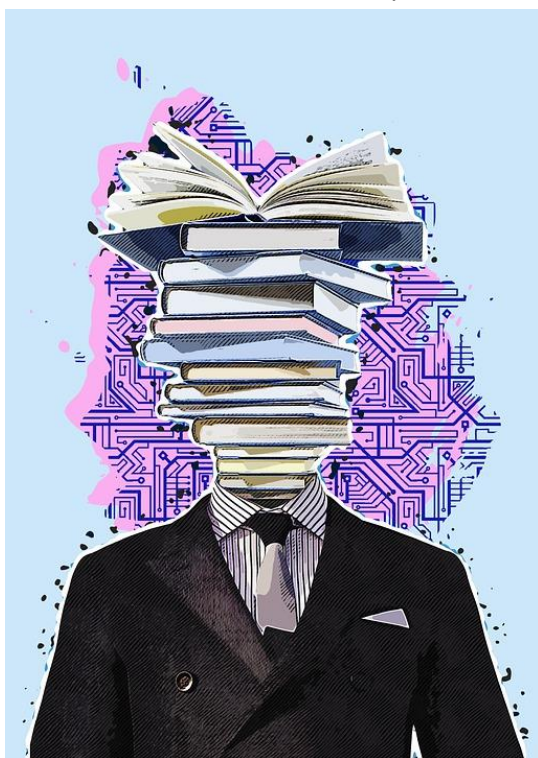
The UCAS reports from 2019 show that 'the most advantaged students are 2.26 times more likely to enter HE than the most disadvantaged.' (UCAS, 2019: n.p.) for showing the risk of entering higher education amongst the working class is unequal economic investment compared with middle class students. Factors such as having to work and therefore lacking time to complete academic workload, struggling to fit in, debt and not getting a graduate job are all a contribution to the risk a working class student might face entering HE; all of

which are factors middle class students are less likely to face.

Students are having to balance paid work with their academic work, with 'the responsibility for funding university study has moved increasingly from the state to the individual student' (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006: 25). As a result of this responsibility shift, students have to find other ways to fund their education. The Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) showed an increase of 11% among students in part time work between the years of 1998-1999 and 2002-2003 (Moreau and Leathwood, 2006).

Providing data to support the notion that students with economic disadvantage face more financial risk than the middle-class students. Callender and Wilkinson (2003) highlight that students from the working class were much more likely to be in paid term-time work than those from a middle class background with records showing high numbers of hours being undertaken.

Not only does this put strain on those students time wise, but the emotional stretch some working class students have to undergo in order to pursue a future in Higher Education is clearly disproportionate. In addition, it could be suggested that the government grants given to make the opportunities more 'equal for all' are not enough, with year after year more students undertaking paid term time work. This could also create barriers making HE inaccessible for some working class students who may have other commitments and priorities. For example, taking care of a family member, where they are unable to take on more





work to support themselves, or running the risk of financial collapse.

Fitting into a white collar world can also be considered a risk factor for working class students. One study showed that working class girls would not consider applying to Oxford or Cambridge as they knew they would not fit in, with female participants making remarks such as not wanting to be 'repressed any more' (Evans, 2009: 348). This suggests some working class students do not even get to the application stage before being turned away indirectly by their own evaluation of the risk with the social background they hold. This uncovers the hidden barriers of unequal

opportunity the working class face in a post industrial society.

Although there are more opportunities for working class people to attend university in post industrial society, social barriers and inequalities are reproduced. Cultural and economic factors are overlooked by the neoliberal view that more opportunities mean equality and freedom for all. In addition, living in a constant risk assessed society, inequalities can arguably be produced within the self. Working class students face risk factors that middle class students do not necessarily have to consider when thinking about their future in HE, and this is clear in data sources based on who and where students attend university.



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