

SAME FORMULA, DIFFERENT FIGURES Change and persistence in class inequalities

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Introduction

Class is not an “essentially” contested concept, as some have claimed (Calvert, 1982) — there is a truth to the operations of class that can and must be approximated with theoretical models — but contested it certainly is. So often has it been claimed irrelevant or dead through the course of the twentieth century that it came as little surprise to witness yet another chorus of funeral orations at the *fin-de-siècle*. Yet it’s true to say that the current crop of class detractors — including postmodernists, globalisation theorists, complexity theorists and so on — have been particularly vocal, widespread and influential, and amongst them the theories of individualization and reflexivity have been most successful in catching the mood of change and fluidity in European societies without lapsing into excessive postmodern proclamations of emancipation. It seems the best way of making sense of the de-industrialising, post-fordist, neo-liberal economy where jobs across the occupational spectrum emerge and disappear overnight, where affluence and rising education levels have opened up life trajectories and consumption practices hitherto off bounds to the majority of the populace and, along with migration, global issues such as climate change and nuclear disarmament and so on, have altered the face of national political debates.

The theories of individualization and reflexivity are associated with a few key names, but they’re all united by the idea that individuals today, whatever their position in society, now have to reflexively consider, negotiate and plan their key life decisions throughout their life course — what to do for a living, whether to change career, whether to have children, what music, sports or clothes to consume or, in short, who they want to be. For Ulrich Beck (1992), this is because expanded education, growing affluence, widespread job insecurity and mushrooming social and geographical mobility have “disembedded” people from their old traditional ways of life, which basically means that the constraints and cultures of classes have weakened and left people no choice but to choose what they want to do with their lives. Anthony Giddens (1991) has put forward similar ideas — though not under the name of individualization — to the effect that globalisation and hence mediated contact with other cultures, but also institutional reflexivity (or the fact that our societies now routinely produce knowledge on themselves and feed these back into their denizens’ lives), mean that there is now a new world of choice open to people. There is also Zygmunt Bauman (2001), who tends to put a much more critical and pessimistic spin on these ideas and focuses in particular on a theme raised by Beck — the idea that people are increasingly being encouraged or forced to conceive of themselves as autonomous individuals, responsible for their own lot, masking the social

processes that actually underlie their fates. For him this is part and parcel of neo-liberal consumerist capitalism which demands constant change and individualism in order to function efficiently. Finally, and most recently, Margaret Archer (2007) has added her name to the register of reflexivity theorists, essentially claiming that the changes brought by modernity have injected opportunity, difference and change into the life conditions of contemporary Europeans and ultimately forced them to have to think, strategise and consider multiple options rather than take for granted that they will perpetuate the traditions of their family or class.

In the end, whatever brand of reflexivity and individualization one goes for, the general message is the same: people from all walks of life are reflexive decision makers and individualists, with class constraints, dispositions, lifestyles and identities disappearing in the flux. This is an immensely influential idea across Europe — it figures in today's textbooks on sociology and social theory as a key interpretation of our times, it's claimed by anti-class theorists to be a significant influence in their assault on class (e. g. Pakulski and Waters, 1996), it's routinely referred to by researchers keen to connect their work to grand sociological theory of some sort, and it's cited constantly by class analysts as typical of the sort of argument they're battling against. It's hard to deny, therefore, the considerable bearing of this thesis on the present and the future of the concept of class.

Responses to reflexivity

The truth is, however, the theories put forward by Beck and the others are remarkably problematic: the conception of class is confused, inadequate, superficial and constantly changing to suit their purpose and the processes they theorise are contradictory or logically unsound (Atkinson, 2007a; 2007b; 2008). In Margaret Archer's case, for example, the fact that she at one and the same time claims that new forms of reflexivity have broken down class barriers but that those new forms of reflexivity are associated with higher education seems somewhat incongruous and reveals what must be a rather narrow definition of class. They cannot, therefore, be accepted as they stand, but neither can they necessarily be rejected outright. It could be that the *general* processes and themes they talk about, when extricated from the problematic vocabulary in which they are enwrapped and reconceived in a sounder framework, still find some support in empirical research. In other words, logical analysis is not enough on its own, for the proof of the theoretical pudding is ultimately, as Loïc Wacquant (2005: 318) put it, in the empirical eating.

Now existing empirical engagements with individualization do exist, but, in Britain at least, they are few in number and far from satisfactory. Some, like John Goldthorpe (2002), have responded by pointing to all sorts of statistical patterns to demonstrate that the class-based structure of inequality — in terms of health, education and other domains of life chances — is stable. This is a fair, but limited, tactic, for marshalling these statistics, and adopting a rational action perspective as Goldthorpe does, does not really provide any answers when it comes to identities, the sense of personal responsibility or, crucially, decision-making mechanisms. There

is simply no investigation of whether there is any reflexivity to speak of on the ground and whether it has replaced class cultures or constraints in producing these patterns, and of course the utilitarian model of action is not necessarily antithetical to, and so does not provide a counter to, the notion of reflexivity.

So perhaps we can turn to the increasingly numerous and influential Bourdieu-inspired qualitative studies to reject individualization and reflexivity once and for all? Again the answer is no, because what we find here is a rather incoherent patchwork of responses produced only in passing. Sometimes reflexivity is depicted as a middle-class phenomenon (Skeggs, 2004), but then as actually a phenomenon of the upwardly mobile (Reay *et al.*, 2005); some people use class labels (Savage, 2000), but others don't (Skeggs, 1997); there is no investigation of employment histories, they only focus on young people, or women, and so on. So the reflexivity thesis seems to escape between the gaps, leaving it in a similar position to the thesis of embourgeoisement in the fifties and sixties: as a substantial popular challenge to the importance of class for sociology that many who research the concept know to be misguided but without the coherent evidence to support that intuition.

In search of the reflexive worker

What is needed, therefore, is something like the famous affluent worker studies of the sixties which demolished the theory of embourgeoisement once and for all by tackling it head-on and testing its propositions (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1968a; 1968b; 1969). This, then, is precisely what the research reported here was intended to be. It cannot, of course, claim to be anywhere near as large scale and conclusive as the affluent worker studies, but nevertheless that famous trilogy served as its general template.

In light of the above critique of Goldthorpe, though statistics provide the necessary backdrop, the method had to be qualitative. It had to look in depth at people's life histories — their early years, education and work lives — if reflexivity or the lack thereof was to be uncovered, and at their self-perceptions, lifestyles and views on all kinds of social and political topics if individualization or classed processes were to be adequately unveiled. "Whose" life histories were to be examined was determined by a mail-out requesting participants sent to individuals drawn at random from the electoral registers of three wards in the UK city of Bristol. 55 people responded altogether, and they covered a range of ages (18 to mid-fifties, with the majority in their 20s and 30s) and occupations, covering a fairly representative spread of generations and social space, though there were, unfortunately, very few ethnic minorities and thus limit generalisation in this regard.

The research was deductive insofar as it tested a set of theoretical propositions — an unusual but not antithetical move for qualitative research — but rather than directly test the conceptually-weak propositions of Beck and the others it was necessary, in the spirit of applied rationalism, to reformulate their fundamental theses, using a more palatable framework, into a reasoned hypothesis (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1991). The first step was to clarify what actually constitutes class, and in this regard I start

from a Bourdieusian base. The contested concept is thus understood in terms of economic capital (money, wealth, property etc.), cultural capital (education, credentials, but also, more generally, symbolic mastery, or a familiarity with abstraction, as opposed to practical mastery) and social capital (connections and affiliation with certain names), with our possession of these putting us above, below, close to and far away from others in an overall social space and mediating our fundamental conditions of life, which in turn produce within us certain dispositions and schemes of perception (or our habitus). “Classes” are therefore clusters of people with similar capital stocks, conditions of existence and thus habitus taken together for analytical purposes, and they are defined by their “relative positions” *vis-à-vis* one another in this overall structure as dominant (high volume of capital), dominated (low volume) or intermediate, not through the “substantial” properties, characteristics or behaviours that attach to them — like particular, concrete occupations, outcomes, dispositions or lifestyle practices. To think the latter, says Bourdieu (1984), would be to fall into the trap of substantialist thinking that ensnares lay thinking and superficial ‘spontaneous sociology’.

There are, however, a few ways in which Bourdieu’s framework can be specified, added to and built upon to better illuminate empirical processes, producing what can be called a “phenomeno-Bourdiesian” approach — a clumsy phrase admittedly, but a necessary one to make clear the points of departure. There is not the space to lay this out in any detail, so only the key points need to be made (for more detail see Atkinson, 2010; forthcoming). First of all, the habitus is usefully reconceived as what Alfred Schutz called the stock of knowledge. The two concepts are more or less the same — they both get at the accumulation of knowledge and “sense” through everyday experience that feeds into action — except that Schutz makes clear that the stock of knowledge is “multilayered” rather than solely bodily, as Bourdieu sometimes implies, and that its dispositions (or “attitudes”) give rise to not just spontaneous and non-conscious action, but conscious, deliberated projects as well, even if agents are not conscious of the principles of their conscious choices. One substantive manifestation of this is the fact that, corresponding to what Bourdieu called our objective field of possibles — our set of objectively possible actions and movements in the social space given our capital and experiences — is the agent’s “subjective field of possible” — that is, the wider or narrower set or type of positions and actions which enter mundane conscious thought as “reasonable” or “doable” in the practical business of decision-making. It is the bounds of our thought, the range of what is thinkable based on a tacit adjustment to what is actually possible or likely — which often gets translated into what we “want” or “like” — even if that thought process is extended.

Secondly, Bourdieu has recently been criticised by Bernard Lahire (2004) for homogenising people within the same class and thus being unable to explain the individuated nature of human life and dissonance from established cultural patterns. The precise nature of this criticism — which has been influential in both Britain, through the work of Bennett and others (2009), and in Portugal through the Observatório das Desigualdades at CIES-IUL — is problematic, for many of the supposed sources of heterogeneity mentioned by Lahire, such as social mobility,

diverse social networks or the contradictory influences of cross-class families, are perfectly explicable with the Bourdieusian notions of social capital and trajectory, and ultimately the fully relational and gradational nature of social space is neglected. Yet if we dig a little deeper into Bourdieu's thought then it is revealed that perhaps Lahire's overall point is not without merit — there is a sense in which much formative experience as given by, for example, physical space, particular consociates or "ideocultures" (Fine, 2006) individuates the habitus but is missed by Bourdieu's focus on the relational differentiation of experience alone. Given that Lahire offers no convincing solution of his own, and since the phenomenological model of the agent has proved useful so far, it seems constructive to draw on an individual-level Schutzian definition of the "lifeworld", which is essentially the individual agent's world of routine, everyday experience building into the habitus *qua* stock of knowledge which expresses their individuality whilst at the same time being formed by the multitude of structural locations and processes the agent is subject to. It is, in other words, a case of seeing the general in the particular, or the nomothetic in the ideographic, without losing or neglecting the latter.

None of this, however, rejects individualization and reflexivity by theoretical fiat. It could still be — and here we get to the reconstructed hypothesis — that the changes of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have produced new "universalizing" conditions of existence (instability, plurality, discontinuity) which, in turn, generate a widespread habitus disposed toward reflexive self-transformation, extended decision-making and individualist schemes of perception — what Paul Sweetman (2003) has called the "reflexive habitus". Only through the trial of empirical research can this model of the social world be confirmed or confuted with any degree of certitude.

So, with that, let us move on to the empirical findings of the project. Now it may spoil the surprise somewhat, but I want to set out at the beginning the underpinning theme that was revealed in all dimensions investigated before going on to demonstrate it. This is that, first of all, social change is no myth; things are not, as someone like Goldthorpe might say, more or less the same as they have been for decades. The truth is we have seen fundamental alterations of the social context, and these have impacted on class. But what we see is not the decline of class, not its death or demise — the structure of "relational" differentiation of capital, conditions of existence and habitus remains "more or less the same as ever" and continues to shape outcomes and behaviours. What has changed is not the structure of class, but "the way in which it manifests"; the precise, concrete symbols, behaviours and "substance" attached to the different positions. This can be demonstrated by looking at four areas examined in the research — there are more topics and they all follow the general theme, but this tactic should hopefully provide a balance of depth and breadth (see further Atkinson, forthcoming).

Before we proceed, a methodological note: Bourdieu's labels of "dominant" and "dominated" have been adopted and generally applied according to the main indicators of capital possession (income, wealth, level of education) set in the context of the national system. These labels should be recognised for what they are: reductive heuristic devices bringing together people who are dispersed in social

space, and therefore in possession of different shades of advantage and disadvantage which, as shall be made clear in the analysis, can make a difference, but who are nonetheless close enough together and distinct enough from others to be treated as members of a separable “class”. Furthermore, though in reality there is an intermediate class, as mentioned above, for comparative clarity and parsimony those who would represent this middling cluster in a fuller picture have been allotted to their closest neighbour in the binary split. It is important to stress these points lest the things of logic be taken for the logic of things, as Bourdieu (looking to Marx) constantly warned, and the assumption be that the analysis here, like the vague analyses of someone like Bauman, reifies a crude and undifferentiated binarism.

Let us begin first of all with the analysis of life histories, understood as individual trajectories through the social space of classes. This can be split into two phases — experience of education and post-educational choices, and work histories — and, proceeding chronologically, the first of these taken as the entry point to analysis.

Education

Much has been made in Britain, and across the world, of the expansion of post-compulsory and particularly higher education and the emergence of a discourse, with associated policies, revolving around options and individual choice, both of which are products of the de-industrialisation of the West and the rise of a global neo-liberal consensus bent on fostering a knowledge economy through the production of human capital.

These macro-processes are not complete myths, they do seem to feed into everyday life and, specifically, manifest in the ways the interviewees talked about their consideration of options after compulsory schooling finished. Dominant and dominated alike reported sustained deliberation of options, a search for what was best “for them” and the use of new individual-centred sources of information such as career services. There was little trace of the kind of occupational reproduction or seamless, unquestioning transition from school to factory floor described thirty years ago by Paul Willis (1977). Furthermore, there were some interviewees who, in line with statistics suggesting that more people from dominated backgrounds are going on to university and so on than ever before, even if the dominant are also more likely to go than ever, had ascended in social space through education, starting in dominated sections of the social space only to get degrees and positions in the dominant sector of social space.

But these changes do not signal the end of class. Instead, this new context is simply the new substance through which the rigid relations of class difference express themselves. Differences in economic and cultural capital continued to differentiate performance at school, orientations to school (a love of learning versus rebellion) and thus the options that were considered after school.

So, those from privileged backgrounds had parents who could afford to send their children to high-performing private schools and, even when this was not the

case, they could, and did, pass on their “cultural capital”. Sustained and successful help and guidance by one or both parents with homework and school projects was often recalled, as were instances of “everyday learning”, or the teaching of reasoning skills and knowledge of science or the arts in everyday life (cf. Lareau, 2003). One respondent, a languages teacher, talked of how her mother, also a teacher, would always make her practice grammar in car journeys as a child, and another, a computer programmer with a maths degree, reported having a grandmother, a university graduate, in her early lifeworld who insisted on referring to cooking spices by their chemical formulae — practices which were bound to deposit valued contents in their stocks of knowledge. The less privileged, on the other hand, reported no such transmission, instead noting how their parents did not have the “time” due to material pressure or the “ability” because of their low cultural capital stocks to help. “They were always working”, “they were too busy looking after all of us”, they “weren’t confident” enough, they “weren’t bothered” because of their own low estimation of an exclusionary institution and so on — these were the kinds words used report parental involvement.

This meant that they performed differently in the school, an institution devoted, after all, to the inculcation and vaunting of cultural capital. The dominant mastered and came to take pleasure in more abstract, academic subjects, talking of certain subjects in the language of enjoyment, “passion” and self-realisation, whilst the dominated, unable to give the school what it demanded, turned instead to the vocational and physical skills they had mastery of and rebelled against or avoided the alien demands of the school altogether, describing themselves as “rebels” and “tearaways” and envisioning school as a place not of learning but, as one interviewee put it, of “survival”. Consequently, and crucially for the purposes at hand, they considered and took very different post-school routes: the dominant pursued university whilst the dominated pursued work. Sure, the precise course, the precise university, or the precise job was mulled, thought about, and centred on what was best for “me”, but in each case the thought process “was bounded by the subjective field of possible”. This was captured when questioning whether dominant interviewees had considered not pursuing higher education and whether dominated interviewees had ever considered staying on. In both cases, the astoundingly common response was an incredulous “no”: it was the “natural thing to do”, they said, it was what “everyone did” (i. e. everyone within their field of experience), what “was done”, so they “never even considered” or “thought about” the opposite course of action. In other words, whilst there was some mundane reflection, perhaps more than in the past, the choice of post-school pathway was conducted within completely “unreflexive” limits set by the relational differences of social space.

But what of the upwardly mobile? Well, rather than prove the weakening of class constraints in late modernity or justify the meritocratic ideal of letting “talent” succeed, the relational reality of class was present here too. On the one hand, the trajectories of the allochthonous were set in motion by experiential peculiarities and hidden advantages stemming from their parents’ slightly higher positioning in social space, demonstrating the power of relational differences to the last inch. So they reported family members who had been to university before them, who,

despite being outside the immediate family context, intervened in their lifeworld, encouraged academic pursuits and set expectations of the possible; they had slightly more money to afford certain avenues; and, ultimately, their parents displayed the general disposition, manifest in a constant encouragement of their children, to “get on” or “better oneself” that, as Bourdieu already noted thirty years ago, prevails in this section of the social space. But on the other hand, their upwards trajectories were hampered by the lack of capital *vis-à-vis* the more affluent counterparts they encountered in their social journey and were, therefore, disproportionately characterised by toil and struggle. They had to gain employment whilst at university to survive, which they admitted impacted negatively upon their studies; they felt that, lacking the inherited cultural capital furnishing ease and confidence with abstraction, they had to work harder than their privileged peers and ended up getting worse grades; and ultimately the subjective field of possibles was different, with, as one interview put it, aspirations being high but not “too high”, that is to say not beyond the bounds of the probable — attend university, but not an elite one like Cambridge; enter a profession, but not one requiring and perpetuating too much capital like medicine.

Work

This educational history set up the interviewees for their experiences in the world of work. Here, what Beck and the others herald as the slayers of class but which, in reality, represent only the shifting substance attached to class positions are job insecurity, redundancy and career shifts, helped along by programmes of lifelong learning aiming to re-equip ousted workers and insert them back into the labour market wherever they can fit. Now job insecurity does not seem to be as widespread as Beck and the others make out — there is pretty good evidence against it (e. g. Goldthorpe and McKnight, 2006) — but in these neo-liberal times, and especially during a recession, it is certainly not uncommon and, indeed, redundancies were a pretty frequent experience amongst the interviewees. Furthermore, occupational shifts, along with conscious deliberation on mid-career options, were commonplace amongst all the interviewees, and though claims on a broad scale are hard to make and a danger of caricaturing the past must be guarded against, it is possible that this could have intensified to some degree under recent economic policies demanding flexibility in a volatile environment.

However, beneath this veneer of insecurity, redundancy and lifelong learning the relations of capital continue to differentiate experiences and trajectories. The dominant possessed enough economic capital (through savings and redundancy payouts) to afford extended time out of work to find a new job that was desirable — they could “take it easy”, really “look around” and even spend time pursuing hobbies without pressure. They possessed enough cultural capital to feel themselves able to retrain at a high level if they wished, confidently describing this as a possible option of needs be. And they possess enough social capital to be able to use connections to secure work when they needed it, talking of friends from university

getting them lucrative jobs when they heard they were without work. Those without such resources, however, were pushed into whichever jobs they could find in order to meet the demands of economic necessity — as one respondent, a plasterer, put it, “you don’t ever get the chance to sit back and think”, “you’ve got to go and earn money [...] So your decisions ain’t always down to yourself”, “it’s [...] what you’re pressured into doing”. They do not, furthermore, feel themselves able to re-train, not just because lack of money for course fees is a barrier, though this was sometimes reported, but because they do not possess the cultural capital required for entry, often describing themselves as “thick” and saying that higher forms of retraining were “too difficult” and not “for me”.

So there was, in short, a heavily circumscribed objective and subjective field of possibles, once again demonstrating “unreflexive” classed limits to thought. In fact, even the precise occupations opted for within the subjective field of possibles were weighted by the past embodied in the habitus, as people essentially strove, under the guise of doing what seemed “normal”, “sensible” or, in other words, in line with tacit expectations of the achievable, to perpetuate skills and knowledge complexes already acquired in the course of their particular occupational experience — teaching, lorry driving, or whatever. This is an example of what Bourdieu (1987) has called “occupational effects” — the compounding and articulation of class by the experiences and dispositions given by one’s occupational history (see further Atkinson, 2009).

Lifestyles

So life paths remain differentiated according to class: the position in social space *attained* is generally *retained* thanks to capital possession despite expanded education and the volatility of the labour market. But what about lifestyles and identities? Surely it is more credible to claim that they no longer draw from class; that with globalisation, multiculturalism and so on there is now so much choice that individuals are, as Giddens claims, forced out of the traditional, classed ways of life, or habitus, of their parents and to forge their own lifestyles? The answer will not be surprising, for it is the same that has been given for education and work: practices and lifestyles have changed in substance, but not in their relational differentiation. There is still a space of lifestyles, or symbolic space, homologous with the social space which serves as the matrix of significations of position, even if the actual symbols themselves are different from those identified by Bourdieu thirty years ago in France.

So affluence means more people can afford more, including cars, houses and wide-screen TVs; geographical mobility has worked against the spatial coagulation of communal practices like the working men’s club; fashions, technology and so on bring changes in clothes, food, music and all the rest — a taste for exotic goods and practices from sushi to Thai kickboxing were present across the reaches of social space. But the patterning of practices still follows a Bourdieusian logic. In particular, there was a notable divide amongst the interviewees between the more “ascetic” practices of the

dominant based on their higher cultural capital (reading “classics”, going to the theatre, playing sports such as squash) and the more “practical and bodily” pursuits of the dominated grounded in their practical mastery (“tinkering” with cars and motorbikes, boxercise, “making things” such as craft models or garments).

This was pronounced even in the field of music, a domain often thought to be especially out of step with Bourdieu’s theory, as too variegated and open to genre blending, eclecticism, diversity or, more simply, what Richard Peterson (1992) has called “omnivorousness”. It was found that amongst the dominant there was an overwhelming propensity to listen to three forms of music: classical (often accompanied by actually playing an orchestral instrument of some kind, usually encouraged in early childhood by capital-rich parents), downbeat electronic music (which has a “chillout” aesthetic often “intellectualized” by commentators in the same way as classical music — e. g. Reynolds (1999) — and thus in line with a certain habitus) and older rock music with biographical significance (that is, it was around when they were growing up and doubtless prompts memories and nostalgia).

The dominated, on the other hand, tended to listen solely to rock, pop, R and B or hip-hop music, with a louder and more vigorous beat that they could, in the interviewees’ words, “jiggle to”, “be hooked by” and “muck about” to as a way to have a “good time” — in other words, as a means to using bodily movement as a convivial release from the demands of life — or with lyrics that spoke to their experience. Finally, there was also a small group of interviewees, usually older and in the more affluent sections of the dominated, shading into the middle sections of social space, that displayed something like what Bourdieu described as the “cultural goodwill” of the *petite bourgeoisie*: they claimed to listen to classical music, but on further, deeper questioning it emerged that though they “appreciate” it, “kinda like” it, find it “uplifting” and “nice”, they find much of it is “too difficult” or “boring” so they don’t go “too deep”, and they prefer it with a “modern beat”, enjoy “film scores”, and consume only the “popular” classics (the *1812 Overture*, *The Planets*, etc.) of the like found on “best of” CDs, even if they “couldn’t tell you who it was”. In other words, they recognised the legitimacy of classical music but lacked the cultural capital to consume it in the legitimate way (operas, full pieces, etc.) — exactly the same stance as found by Bourdieu amongst this section of social space thirty years ago. All in all, not much support for Giddens’ theory of reflexive lifestyles — capital and class habitus still hold court — and though obviously national, let al. one international, trends cannot be derived from these findings, it also appears that the qualitative analysis of tastes, knowledge and biographical import illuminates a reality hidden by the statistical trends supportive of the omnivore thesis as well, including those of Bennett and others (2009), and give cause for vigilance when dealing with this popular idea.

Finally, it is revealing that the interviewees sensed their ‘place’ vis-à-vis others in the social space, describing difference and social distance on the basis of capital, lifestyles and other dispositions in a variety of ways and even relaying a sense of living in separate “worlds” or “realities” from others seen as below or above them and recounting instances where that difference had engendered what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence — the sense of shame, self-consciousness and low self-worth

forced upon the dominated by people who perceive themselves as superior. Given that all this is what Bourdieu would put under the label of social identity, it seems that the claims of Beck and the others to the effect that, alongside the rise of reflexivity, class identities have faded, usually targeting to a non-relational conception of self-perception, is misguided.

Class discourse

All this just leaves one question left to answer: if class is so obviously important for people's lives, do they themselves see it as such? Do they use class as a label to make sense of difference, symbolic violence and inequality? The answer here is yes and no. Yes, sometimes class did serve as an unprompted tool for understanding differences, being used as a descriptor of places, backgrounds and people encountered in the course of experience. When asked, moreover, all the respondents recognised the existence of social class and linked it with money, education, occupation and certain behaviours and values — in other words, the capital, dispositions and symbols of social and symbolic space. Most identified themselves with a class and, crucially, most read it back into their own perceived economic and educational advantages and disadvantages in life in some way, therefore delivering a body blow to the notion of individualization. Yet despite recognising its impact on their own lives, very few of the respondents saw it as an important social or political issue. Aided by the dismemberment of the trade union movement in Britain under Margaret Thatcher and the dominance of a neo-liberal discourse in which, insofar as they are recognised at all, their existence is seen as legitimate, the continuation of class differences was so taken-for-granted, so doxic as Bourdieu would say, that the fatalistic refrain "you'll always have classes", and the view that they must in some way be necessary for society to work, was widespread.

Conclusion

A little way through *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 101) expressed his theory of class in terms of a formula. This move has been savaged by many as confused, reductive, unhelpful and pointless, but there is at least one sense in which class can indeed be compared to an equation. For just as the mathematical procedure remains structurally the same no matter what actual figures are put into it and thus what the precise output is, so too it seems the relational structure of class difference, of the social space, has stayed as rigid as ever despite the changed social, political and cultural context that feeds into it and thus the different concrete manifestations it produces. Yet there is a key difference between the algebraic and the social formula which is, unfortunately, masked by the latter's stubbornness and legitimacy in the dominant discourse: the social formula "can" change with political intervention, its just that such intervention has not been witnessed hitherto and, as we observe a resurgent Right in the UK, is unlikely to be forthcoming any time soon.

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Resumo/ abstract/ résumé/ resumen

A mesma fórmula, números diferentes: mudança e persistência nas desigualdades de classe

Muitos teóricos sociais contemporâneos têm defendido que as mudanças sociais ocorridas nas últimas décadas aniquilaram a influência das classes nas histórias de vida, nas identidades e na política, colocando no seu lugar a escolha reflexiva e o individualismo. Este artigo apresenta uma síntese dos resultados de um projecto de investigação recentemente realizado no Reino Unido com o objectivo de testar essas teses. Partindo de um modelo de classes "fenomenológico-bourdieuiano", e recorrendo a entrevistas de história de vida, a pesquisa revela não o declínio das classes mas a sua reinvenção no capitalismo avançado. Têm vindo a surgir novas práticas e novos percursos, mas tal representa apenas a mudança da substância das classes — enquanto a estrutura subjacente das diferenças relacionais que define as classes e produz diferentes manifestações permanece tão patente como dantes.

Palavras-chave Bourdieu, classe, individualização, reflexividade.

Same formula, different figures: change and persistence in class inequalities

Many contemporary social theorists have argued that the social changes of the last few decades have shattered the hold of class over life histories, identities and politics and put in its place reflexive choice and individualism. This paper presents a summary of a

recently completed research project in the UK designed to put these claims to the test. Starting out from a “phenomeno-Bourdieuian” model of class and deploying life history interviews it reveals not the decline of class in advanced capitalism, but its reinvention. New practices and pathways have emerged, but they represent only the shifting substance of class — the underlying structure of relational difference that defines class and produces different outcomes remains as patent as ever.

Keywords Bourdieu, class, individualization, reflexivity.

Même formule, chiffres différents: changement et persistance dans les inégalités de classe

Nombre de sociologues contemporains soutiennent que les changements sociaux survenus au cours des dernières décennies ont anéanti l’influence des classes sur les histoires de vie, sur les identités et sur la politique, en mettant à leur place le choix réflexif et l’individualisme. Cet article présente une synthèse des résultats d’un projet de recherche mené au Royaume-Uni dans le but de tester ces thèses. En partant d’un modèle de classes “phénoménologique/bourdieuian” et en réalisant des entretiens d’histoires de vie, la recherche révèle non pas le déclin des classes mais leur réinvention dans le capitalisme avancé. On peut observer de nouvelles pratiques et de nouveaux parcours, mais cela traduit uniquement le changement de la substance des classes — tandis que perdure la structure sous-jacente des différences relationnelles qui définit les classes et produit différentes manifestations.

Mots-clés Bourdieu, classe, individualisation, réflexivité.

La misma fórmula, números diferentes: cambio y persistencia en las desigualdades de clase

Muchos teóricos sociales contemporáneos han defendido que los cambios sociales ocurridos en las últimas décadas aniquilaron la influencia de las clases en las historias de vida, en las identidades y en la política, colocando en su lugar la elección reflexiva y el individualismo. Este artículo presenta una síntesis de los resultados de un proyecto de investigación recientemente realizado en el Reino Unido con el objetivo de probar esas tesis. Partiendo de un modelo de clases “fenomenológico-bourdieuiano”, y recurriendo a entrevistas biográficas, la investigación revela no el declive de las clases pero sí su reinención en el capitalismo avanzado. Han surgido nuevas prácticas y nuevos recorridos, lo que representa apenas el cambio de la substancia de las clases — en relación a la estructura subyacente de las diferencias relacionales que define a las clases y produce diferentes manifestaciones permanece tan patente como antes.

Palabras-clave Bourdieu, clase, individualización, reflexividad.