Class, Dispositions and Radical Politics – a Rejoinder

John Smyth
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Robin Simmons
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Abstract

This paper is a rejoinder to James Avis'paper: A Note on Class, Dispositions and Radical Politics which is, in turn, a critique of the opening chapter of the book Education and Working-Class Youth: Reshaping the Politics of Inclusion, written by the authors of this article. Here we deal with each of the criticisms raised by Avis, including his accusation that our position is reductionist and fails to recognise the complex nature of social class in contemporary society. In doing this, we re-emphasise our relational perspective on education and social class.

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Class, Dispositions and Radical Politics – a Rejoinder

There is much we would like to agree with in James Avis's use of our paper *Where is Class in the Analysis of Working-Class Education*? which formed the opening chapter of the recently published edited collection *Education and Working-Class Youth: Reshaping the politics of inclusion* (Simmons and Smyth, 2018). But his critique, which also appears in this issue of the *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, introduces much confusion in conflating his

interests with ours. In this sense, there is much to disagree with, and that needs to be exposed in order to provide a more nuanced and complex understanding of what we were attempting.

A major problem is that Avis invokes our work and then slides past it in order to address his own quite different agenda, leaving our piece in a kind of sleight of hand suspended animation.

For starters, it was not our intention to draw attention to the affective dispositions of any 'other groups', such as ageism, religiosity, race, gender or ethnicity. We acknowledge that these other groups constitute an inextricable constellation in the struggle around material conditions. But, whilst explicating what is occurring in the other parts of this constellation is a crucial and important task, it was not our remit; we are pleased that Avis has taken it up, but it was not our focus.

Invoking Doreen Massey (1994; 2004), and like Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1963, p. 136) who Avis draws on extensively, we adopt a 'relational' view of class, which we make clear, is not static or stable, but highly mutable and on-going. Thus, like Goldthorpe, we reject the 'embourgeoisement' thesis of the working class into the middle class; something Avis neglects to mention, instead assigning us - without evidence - to an alignment with the former.
In fact, we argue the obverse: namely, that working-class experiences constitute a distinctive disposition or hue, notwithstanding, as Goldthorpe and Lockwood put it

> a new factor [is] entering into the discussion - that of working-class 'affluence' brought about by 'economic progress'. (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1963, p. 134)

Our point is that schools, as Avis explains, are social institutions ‘‘replete with middle-class norms - a site of middle-class hegemony’’. We not at all clear then, what it is that Avis finds so problematic about our dispositional working-class analysis - based as it is on both structure and experience - given that he twice makes mention, approvingly, of the fact that:

> The affective dispositions of the working class are rooted within the lived experiences, as well as the structural location of this class. What is significant about Smyth and Simmons’ argument is that they invert and offer a corrective to deficit models drawing out and celebrating particular dispositional features of the class.

Then a few paragraphs later in his discussion of Goldthorpe’s contrast of ‘traditional working class’ studies with the ‘new working-class studies’ of the 1960s’, Avis says:

> The importance of these studies is that like Smyth and Simmons such class-based orientations were embedded in the social structure as well as lived experience.

It seems that Avis’s problem is with his own extrapolation of our work, which unfortunately extends almost to putting words in our mouths. For example, he seems to attach value statements to our work which we do not make - allegedly, ‘positive’ valuation on what we depict as ‘‘working-class dispositions’’, and a ‘negative’ value on our portrayal of the ‘‘middle-class norms of schools’’. The working-class characteristics we describe, ‘‘attachment to place’’, ‘‘immediacy’’, a ‘‘tendency to self-blame’’ and so on are not necessarily good or bad; in fact, such characteristics tend to be regarded differently depending upon the context in which they are enacted. The same could be said about middle-class characteristics such as ‘‘delayed gratification’’ or ‘‘competitive individualism’’. It would, however, seem reasonable to suggest that many traits

often associated with working-class youth tend to be devalued in educational settings.

Either way, without any substantiation Avis says:

> For Smyth and Simmons far greater weight is attached to their working class affective dispositions, which perhaps we could think of as a particular class cultural formation.

Yet we make no such claims for ‘a particular class cultural formation’.

What we do point to in our analysis, are some salient and enduring features derived from seminal research on working-class life by Simon Charlesworth (2000) in his book *A phenomenology of working-class experience*; a study set in Rotherham in South Yorkshire.

Charlesworth’s research, upon which much of our discussion is based, addresses the call by Goldthorpe and Lockwood (1963) four decades earlier in their rejection of Zweig’s (1961) absorption or ‘‘embourgeoisement’’ claim that ‘‘large sections of the working class’’ were increasingly finding themselves ‘‘on the move’’ towards ‘‘middle values and middle class existence’’ (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1963, p. 136) - a claim repeated by Zweig (2000) that because of worker loss of control over the nature of work, that we are now all working class. In Goldthorpe and Lockwood’s (1963) words:

> What is necessary, in our view, is that economic, normative and relational aspects of the matter [class] should each be studied as rigorously as possible, and that any conclusions concerning *embourgeoisement* should be formed on the basis of research specifically focussed on the problem in this way, rather than being merely *ad hoc* generalisations drawn from a shapeless mass of data (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1963p. 136- emphasis in the original).

which is precisely what we have done!

We are somewhat perplexed as to how our work which Avis acknowledges ‘‘derives from a particular construction of affective dispositions’’, and that is closely informed by lived experiences within particular contexts, can be depicted as being ‘‘essentialised and reductive’’.

In a contradictory admission, Avis says in footnote 3 that he is ‘‘[A]ware that the authors draw on a range of writers that extend well beyond the North of England’’. This is particularly odd as, whilst working-class communities in Northern England have undoubtedly experienced various forms of pain and suffering over the years, the notion of social haunting to which Avis refers is in fact drawn from North America (c.f. Gordon, 1997) and one of the authors of the chapter, which Avis critiques has written extensively about questions of education and social class in the Australian ‘rustbelt’, and further afield (c.f. Smyth, Down and McInerney, 2010).

What Avis seems to be unable to grasp is that all research is context bound. We are not trying to ‘generalise’ in our work to the educational experiences of working-class young people everywhere; we recognise that space, place and so on are important when examining the lived experience of social class. But following Charlesworth, we believe that the working-class dispositions we describe ‘‘will be *familiar to* economically powerless and politically disposed people’’ elsewhere (from back cover of Charlesworth’s book—emphases added)—and we provide extensive references as to where those other UK and international contexts are.

Of course, our research is ‘selective’, as Avis is correct to point out - practically-speaking it has to be- but this does not necessarily mean it is

‘flawed’ or lacks merit. At the risk of making a sweeping generalisation, research is almost always provisional, in the sense that it has to be subjected to confirmation or refutation in other particular contexts and circumstances. To suggest otherwise is to be mischievous.

Avis makes a number of other assertions with which we take issue. One is his allusion to a set of views which prevailed in the 1960s that pointed to an ‘‘association of delinquency and educational failure with working-class culture’’. Yet we make no claim that approximates to such a statement.

In another leap of logic, we are expected to accept the notion that the act of explicating a set of dispositional traits that apply to working-class youth, can somehow be collapsed down also to ‘race’. We are not made privy to how this collapse of categories from class to race occurs, although Avis seems to believe that if it is dangerous to attach dispositions to notions of race then, *ipso facto*, it must also be so with class. None of this has anything to do with matters we raise in our chapter although we are, of course, aware of the complex ways in which questions of race, ethnicity, gender and other forms of difference interface and interact with social class. This is why we invited various authors to address such matters in *Education and Working-Class Youth* (c.f. Archer, 2018; Bright, 2018; Reay, 2018; Stahl, 2018).

The rest of Avis’s paper consists of a series of claims that purport to show how middle-class young people are also being disadvantaged in a collapsing youth labour market typified by the unstoppable tendency towards ‘‘low-waged precarious jobs’’. We are, of course, aware of such tendencies, which Guy Standing (2011) articulated in his popular book, *The Precariat*, and Avis rehearses this, at least in part, in his Chapter in our book. Clearly, the rise of various forms of insecure, transitory or otherwise ‘poor work’ has affected a

broad cross-section of the populace and the significant rates of graduate unemployment, and especially underemployment, we see in the UK and elsewhere are, of course, deeply problematic (c.f. Ainley, 2016; Reay, 2018).

Working-class youth have, however, borne the brunt of the ongoing restructuring of the labour market which has taken place under neoliberal regimes. For many, the proletarian experience is now one of indefinite poverty and insecurity, churning between various forms of marginal participation and non-participation in education and work, not only during youth but throughout adult life (c.f. Shildrick et al., 2012).

Whilst those from more privileged backgrounds can, of course, be affected by labour market insecurity, they are, however, also more likely to be able to mobilise various social, cultural and material advantages which their working-class peers are unlikely to possess. The influx of middle-class young people into retail and other parts of the service sector, once largely the preserve of working-class youth, also means that those from working-class backgrounds may be squeezed out of the labour market, sometimes almost indefinitely (Simmons, Thompson and Russell, 2014).

So, whilst we recognise that labour market insecurity and precariousness are general trends, it evident that those from different backgrounds are more or less well equipped to function within such a context. Yet somehow, we are expected to accept the claim that our allegedly ‘‘simplified and homogenised view of the working class […] is debilitating and leads to a restrictive understanding of class’’. It is disappointing that our chapter has been misread in such a fashion. From where we are coming from, working-class youth deserve better than this.

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Author Details

John Smyth is a Visiting Professor of Education and Social Justice at the University of Huddersfield and an Emeritus Research Professor of Education, Federation University Australia.

Robin Simmons is Professor of Education at the University of Huddersfield.

Corresponding Author: Robin Simmons
Professor of Education
School of Education and Professional Development
University of Huddersfield
Huddersfield
West Yorkshire
HD1 3DH

E-mail: j.smyth@hud.ac.uk