

# Afterword

## above one's station

### English

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#### Prepositional phrase

1. Of higher [social status](#) than suitable for one's position, standing or rank.

*The serf's ideas of equity were **above his station**.*

Wiktionary  
(retrieved 26.4.22)

I am sitting in the university library reading journal articles when suddenly I think – ‘Oh – is that all they want?’ This is the first time I remember understanding what an academic argument was (not a row or a punch-up in the car park). I was in my 20s and had returned to university following a (then) non-degree teacher training. This light-bulb moment happened to me many times. Like many of the writers in this volume, I assumed that academic work was ‘head-hurt’ hard. I remember thinking at school that you had to have a big brain (as in *Brain of Britain*, a then popular radio programme – which led me to believe that all you needed to do was remember things). But every time, I thought this same ‘oh! Is THAT all they want?’, I realised that I had to put aside my idea that only very special people (mostly men) with big brains could possibly understand really hard things and therefore be let in. Because, I learnt that, when you understood the academic rules of the game, they were, in fact, easy. I can’t say that the feeling of being found out as stupid disappeared quickly as in a puff of smoke. Occasionally it still comes to haunt me. But then, as now, it was the joy of ideas that kept me going. It was so exhilarating. Just like the beautiful scene of watching planes take off from Manchester Airport and wanting to fly, as described by one of the chapter authors.

As several people in this volume argue, this is not about having aspirations, of growing up without any dreams. But some dreams are often presented as ridiculous by teachers in school. I mean, I wanted to be Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* – already fanciful – and the idea that I should have aspired instead to be a professor was simply non-thinkable. For a start, I

didn't know what one was, and, even if I had, nobody would have assumed it applied to the likes of me. This was the 1960s, a time when only 13% of 18-year-olds went on to *any* form of higher education.

This volume offers an enormously important set of accounts. What do we learn about becoming a working-class academic from them? The book covers a huge, diverse range of historical moments, and yet despite this, they routinely show similar experiences. In itself this alone is depressing and illustrates the continued significance of class, particularly when one understands that these accounts stem from the few people who actually achieved a PhD – something even more prescient when we understand that in the UK over 50% of 18-year-olds go on to higher education.

Given that, these accounts are also uplifting because they illustrate the courage and determination of those working-class students who do manage to gain entry to the academy.

For me then, these stories highlight the key significance of approaching class through embodied experience – that is, how class is lived and experienced through its affective resonances and discursive and material organisation.

But more than this, these stories also act as a key resource. The role of the ethnographer has traditionally been to understand how the 'ethnos' understand their world. But the world of working-class transition can only be auto-written because otherwise it tends to be ignored, misrepresented or pathologised. So many of us have felt alone in higher education and students need stories to connect with, stories that help them understand their own experience. In the light of the scant attention paid to class and classism within the academy, contained principally in patronising and usually broken attempts at 'widening participation' (Walkerline, 2020), this collection functions as a crucial intervention.

I would go further and say that such work can form the basis of what is currently being called autotheory (Fournier, 2022). That is, the building of an account of class by theorising one's own life. We all know that class divisions are at the heart of much politics today, and building other accounts and other theories is such an important intervention into the politics of class.

The characteristics of these working-class academics is not therefore one of actual failure but rather a potent sense of fear of failure, of being an imposter, of not belonging, but crucially they are also a dream of possibility – of a desire for a different life – a dream and the difficult path of following that dream.

I was really struck by the longing contained in many of the stories. I recognise that longing – such a strong desire to be able to think and to dream. How I revelled in it and nothing and nobody could take this away from me. Just think what would happen if all the working-class children were actually supported in their dreaming (Morgan, 2021) – what a revolution that would be!

When my parents and grandparents were alive, getting above one's station was almost impossible. And when I was young, women's magazines were full of stories of finding a higher status husband. Although 50% of 18-year-olds now enter higher education, the situation is still replete with obstacles. The introduction of enormous fees, with their associated debts, the huge divisions in status between universities, academic staff under pressure just to give a few examples, all still mean that it is very difficult to give working-class students as much support as they deserve.

For all this, however, I am so happy that working-class academic work is now being widely developed, and I salute this and all attempts not only to bring class back onto the agenda but also to develop our own autotheorisations through which we might understand and engage with class in the present as it rears its head in all facets of social life.

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## References

- Fournier, L. (2022). *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing, and criticism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Morgan, R. (2021). *Young people's access to employment in disadvantaged communities in Wales*. PhD thesis, Cardiff University.
- Walkerdine, V. (2020). What's class got to do with it? Discourse. *Does Class Still Matter? Conversations About Power, Privilege and Persistent Inequalities in Higher Education*, 42(1), 60–74.