

Working Class Academics Conference: Tuesday 14 July 2020

Theme 4. Introduction.

Our contributors to the fourth session of the Working-Class Academics Conference examine the class control of knowledge through a scrutiny of the processes, events and sites of education.

Whatever else academia may be, it is also an economic apparatus for the perpetuation of class division. Before working-class people can reap the benefits of education, a struggle must be undertaken to adapt to or resist its class coding. Education in this sense acts as the regulatory apparatus of a social order. It designates working-class life and experience as something to be transcended and abandoned or rendered invisible and irrelevant.

Acknowledging class difference in academia disrupts the notion that education affects us all in equal ways. Our social order would of course collapse without the working class. In order to perpetuate itself, our society requires our working-class bodies, lifeblood and labour power, but our minds must be reprogrammed so that our perspectives align with those of the socially dominant class. In these three presentations we see concrete examples of this reprogramming. We see how academia functions as a stripping mechanism, culturally 'fleecing' those entering it, and replacing what it removes with a mode of being and thinking that serves to obscure working class experience itself. In the process, academia severs our working-class roots, alienating us from the communities we emerge from.

With the poet Tony Harrison, and the writer DBC Pierre as her guides, and drawing upon personal experience of her journey through academia, **Dr Eileen Fitzgerald** describes the commercial instrumentalisation and 'everyday elitism', of universities. Eileen imagines a reversal of this situation, where instead of a dominant class establishing the language, precepts, systems and uses of education – education itself is transformed by the qualities and experiences brought to it by working class students. Eileen's paper is a plea for the creation of a non-elitist education system in which imagination, creativity and poetry are the drivers of thought. Genuine equality of access for all who want it is the goal - at any stage of life.

Where working class experience does become the focus of academic discourse, it is frequently a discourse that prioritises the voices of those who are the beneficiaries of the class system. **Dr Vassilissa Carangio** uses an autoethnographic 'methodology of the heart' to examine processes of 'silent exclusion' in academic conferences which focus on business education. Vassilissa's own experience as a working-class academic is examined through the theoretical lens of *Intersectionality*. The 'classifications' of her own life and family history provide the living context for an analysis of the way such lived experience is excluded from academic debate, leading to the widespread theorisation of class from above. Her presentation highlights how mainstream academia marginalizes cultural capital from 'the bottom' by reinforcing middle-class normativity within academic spaces.

Andrew Preater's paper casts light on mechanisms of class-discrimination in academia, in his examination of the way university libraries function as sites of exclusion. In slides available on the conference website, Andrew examines the way values are enshrined in places of learning, with reference to the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Fobazi Ettarh's Critical Race Theory, and the writings of feminist theorist Nancy Fraser. These ideas are considered in the light of experiences of contemporary library users. Andrew points to how academic libraries reflect and represent middle class norms, in spaces, collections and policy, and considers strategies for their transformation into sites of democratic learning.