

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**THE EDUCATIONAL ELEVATOR: EDUCATION**  
**IN THE MODERN CLASS STRUCTURE**  
**AND THE CREATION OF THE NEW PETTY**  
**BOURGEOISIE**

*“...the job of [state] education is to divide and separate the popular classes.”*

Nicos Poulantzas, *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*

When I was in primary school, my best mates were two lads called Tom and Justin. Everyone called Justin “Eggy” because his father was called Eggy (his brother was also called Eggy). Both Tom and Eggy came from working-class, single-parent families who had moved to Porthcawl from the “proper” Welsh, working-class parts of Wales: the valleys to the north. We were best mates because we lived on the same street, although they both lived in flats whilst my parents owned our house. We were inseparable. We remained best friends when we all moved up to the comp, and played rugby and walked to school together.

When we were aged thirteen-fourteen, we got placed in different sets. Then we picked different GCSE options. We would still walk to and home from school together and see each other in break, but never during class. Soon, my time spent playing with my mates after school would also be limited — I’d be inside doing homework while they stayed out kicking a football or rugby ball around. Their parents didn’t help them with their homework like mine did, but

Tom and Eggy didn’t seem to care about homework that much anyway.

We were still best friends, but I gradually also started hanging round with the non-sporty boys in the set I was in too, and stopped seeing as much of Tom and Eggy: like many of my childhood friends, they both left school at sixteen whilst I stayed on for sixth form. I was going to go to university and leave my town and friends.

We began to drift apart, to be separated by forces beyond our control, like shipwrecked sailors in the sea being sucked apart by some invisible current, helplessly watching each other disappear over the horizon.

I don’t even remember consciously wanting or choosing this path, it was just how it was. Gradually, we learned that we were different. By the time we were fourteen — still children — and despite growing up on the same street, going to the same school and being from the same community, our horizons and expectations (and of course, reality) had been formed differently. We had been split apart by class in a way that was unspoken but mutually understood.

The central sorting mechanism that separated us into two piles, and made us aware of what pile we were in, was school.

### The Function of School

Education is a widely understood proxy for class divides in most societies. Earnings in the UK have historically been higher for those with more qualifications. Educational qualifications are therefore widely understood to be a form of cultural capital that can be converted into economic capital. Discussions of Brexit and “populism” among the commentariat also frequently focus on educational qualifications as a predictor of voting and ideology, becoming an acceptable way of disguising class hatred. Brexiteers and

Trump voters in particular were portrayed as thick and uneducated, their lack of educational qualifications a neat explanation as to why they voted as they did. Relatedly, class dealignment is also increasingly understood through education: the main predictor of support for the Democrats, the Labour Party and "progressive politics" more generally is increasingly higher education rather than income.

When the relationship of the education system itself to the class structure is discussed, it perpetuates the unhelpful assumptions about a simplistic dual class structure: we have the working class, on the one hand, and the elites on the other. Thus, in the UK, we talk about the inequity of the private school system and how it perpetuates inequality, and how many top politicians, lawyers, judges and civil servants went to the same small handful of absurdly expensive schools. Or, at the other extreme, we wring our hands about the educational experiences of the most deprived pupils: poor kids are disadvantaged by the poverty of their parents, they lack the right equipment at home to do homework, they can't afford school uniform and so on. This was particularly evident during the COVID pandemic.

These observations are obviously important, but they are also very partial accounts of the role of education in the class structure. While the focus in the discourse on education is, perhaps understandably, on the dramatic plight, suffering and non-engagement of children eligible for free school meals,<sup>7</sup> what is never really discussed is the experience and function of school for the children just above that group. In most schools, of course, children eligible for free school meals remain a minority. So what about the majority of children in the UK who are not receiving

<sup>7</sup> In the UK, the most deprived students are eligible for free school meals, and hence free school meal eligibility is the standard measure of the deprivation of a school.

free school meals and who also aren't from comfortable backgrounds? Society isn't made up of chimney sweeps and toffs, so the left's traditional focus on private schools has always seemed a bit of a red herring, which glosses over class divides between the subordinate classes in the state sector. It tells us nothing about the new petty bourgeoisie — i.e., the children just above those who are eligible for free school meals, who are their friends, who don't go to private school but *may* go to university — and how they experience education and how this forms their ideology and class consciousness *vis à vis* both the bourgeoisie and the working class.

School and formal education play a particularly important role in the formation and socialization of the middle classes, and the new petty bourgeoisie in particular. Education is where the character of this class is developed and the social, cultural and ideological boundaries between it and the working class are formed and hardened.

### Education in the Capitalist System

Education plays a central role in capitalist society. It must reproduce and inculcate in students not just capitalist "ideology", but the entire set of capitalist social relations of production, from the division of labour to the class system itself.

Education has evolved to meet the changing needs of the capitalist system. This is a general rule that applies to all countries, but of course different countries have different education systems, which reflect their different economies, class structures, political cultures and political priorities. "Politics" does not simply reflect class divisions passively but plays an active role in shaping class and class divides as different parties and movements seek to mobilize or co-opt particular classes or groups, or seek to reward or expand

their social bases in different classes. This is often done through education policy.

During the early years of the Industrial Revolution, the poor lived in horrendous conditions and child labour was common. The little education the poor did receive was ad hoc, and largely through religious organizations and Sunday schools. Even in these contexts, the focus was often on moral and spiritual education. As late as the 1850s in the UK, half of all children did not attend school, normally because they were working.

During the early industrial period, education was reserved for the rich, despite the fact that the children of the rich, much like the children of the poor, at this stage of capitalism actually had little need for an extensive formal education. Capital had not yet been collectivised: there was not yet any "professional class" of managers and overseers, but rather a stark division of labour and simple class structure between a relatively small amount of owners, landowners and workers. In other words, education did not "create" the bourgeoisie, for it was already in place anyway, and hence the education the rich received was in the humanities, subjects that helped them rule, rather than subjects like science, which would help them produce.

The bourgeoisie had much to fear from the education of the working class and hence initially prevented it. Yet mass public education nonetheless rapidly developed — and, indeed, was encouraged by capitalists — for two interrelated reasons. First, the maturation of capitalism itself; and second, the rationalisation of the modern capitalist nation-state. According to Hobsbawm, the first Industrial Revolution (taking place from the mid-eighteenth century until the early nineteenth century) was largely led by countries without an educated populace. The industries and technology that stood behind the early Industrial Revolution (iron and textiles) were relatively primitive and

required not so much technical skill as brawn and a mass of cheap, desperate labour. Skilled craft labour, as we have seen, was mainly concentrated in the petty bourgeoisie. Yet technological advances, specifically the increasing role of chemicals and electricity in production techniques, drove "the increasing penetration of industry by science", which underpinned the second Industrial Revolution (which took place in the mid-nineteenth century); and hence drove the need for a more educated workforce in a way that had simply not been necessary from the point of view of the bourgeoisie in the first industrial period. As technology developed and became increasingly important to the production process, it became impossible for countries lacking effective mass education systems to become or remain industrial powerhouses. It was therefore the self-interest of capital, rather than moral appeals from liberals for the virtue of education, which drove the creation of mass public education.

Alongside this was a need to rationalize the modern nation-state, which often involved binding troublesome regions and potentially revolutionary subaltern classes into the state. Male suffrage was to be granted, and mass education was therefore required to inculcate nationalism (and, in many multinational states, a standardized national language) and to promote uniformity and ideology throughout, ensuring loyalty to the status quo. During this period, national bureaucracies emerged (e.g., the civil service, education, militaries), and compulsory education, including national universities, was central to this.

Thus mass elementary (i.e., early) education emerged in the UK and across much of Western Europe in the latter parts of the nineteenth century. As a result of these combined drivers, illiteracy was largely eradicated. At the start of the nineteenth century, around 50% of the British public were illiterate. By the start of the twentieth century,

*Hobsbawm*  
*literacy & education*

this was around 3%. Hobsbawm argues that it was literacy that represented the major split between the advanced industrial economies and the underdeveloped.

*H. B. v*  
*the*

The introduction of mass education had a complex impact on the class structure. While the elites remained where they were, mass literacy among the working class impacted on the new petty-bourgeois fraction of clerks in particular. Previously, literacy had been a key dividing line between the new petty bourgeoisie and the working class, both in terms of market position and general prestige, and so, with mass literacy, they now risked losing the slender status and benefits they had had over the working class. Significantly, as John Foster argues, much of the opposition to mass working-class education during this time came from elements of the petty bourgeoisie who viewed it as a threat to "tradesman exclusiveness" and hence their status.

As the democratic capitalist state became formalized and rationalized, with suffrage being increasingly extended to the ever-expanding and dangerous proletariat, and as the economy evolved and unproductive roles grew, the newly created middle classes beneath the owners sought a route into the latter, and a way of distinguishing themselves from the now somewhat educated proletariat, who seemed to be biting their ankles from below. The method for obtaining this social mobility, demonstrating one's class position and status in society, was formal education, and hence the middle-class focus on education as a vehicle for social mobility began. As Hobsbawm put it:

Schooling provided above all a ticket of admission to the recognized middle and upper zones of society and a means of socializing the entrants into the ways which would distinguish them from the lower orders.

*superior to mobility*

Secondary education had previously been rare, but with the new need for distinction between the middle and lower orders, secondary education to the age of eighteen expanded in terms of numbers attending far beyond the size of the bourgeoisie proper, which was still relatively small, and for whom education still remained divorced from the industries they owned, and served primarily to win connections and roles within government and empire. Education was therefore of disproportionate importance for those with new money but not status, for whom social mobility was of the utmost necessity to avoid falling down the social ladder: the new professional and managerial classes and the children of the increasing amounts of self-made men who were becoming owners.<sup>8</sup> Formal education thus became the chief vehicle of social mobility, the primary indicator of which class you belonged to and was therefore prized by the middle classes because of their desire to set themselves apart from the lower classes.

Hobsbawm argues that the expansion of education was a conscious hegemonic strategy on the part of the ruling classes. Within a society riven by glaring divisions, the elites came to recognize the value of education in creating social stability, creating a loyal buffer class between them and the proletariat. The expansion of education was therefore specifically designed to co-opt the aspirational middle classes and keep them onside by providing an attractive hierarchy and "social stairway" to the upper orders. Of course, the ladder could rarely be climbed, and certain positions then rarely held, but what mattered was

*buffer class*

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, these schools in fact did not impart "technical" education for future members of the nascent professional-managerial classes, but instead subjects like Latin — schools were explicitly about inculcating "cultural capital" and training wannabes in the habitus of the bourgeoisie.

that the middle classes *had to think that it could be*. This would keep them onside and ensure that they identified with the hierarchy, rather than throwing their lot in with the lower classes and fermenting revolution. After all, people are not inclined to smash a system they think they can get to the top of, and the educational divides ensured that they had a class beneath them to look down on and define themselves against. From the very beginning, social mobility via education was an ideological strategy designed to shore up the status quo.

The expansion of education continued unabated following the turn of the century. The 1902 Education Act formally enshrined public secondary education into law and brought schools under the control of local authorities, leading to increasing standardization in teaching and curricula. The 1918 Education Act then raised the school leaving age to fourteen, although these rapid improvements and changes were then paused until after the Second World War, whereupon the implementation of the 1944 Education Act (also known as the Butler Act) promised secondary education for all and formally enshrined mass secondary education up to age fifteen — previously all schools were elementary (for ages five-fourteen) — and ended fees for secondary local authority-maintained schools.

Free education for all was a cornerstone of the Beveridge Report that underpinned the welfare state and a central ideological pillar of the Keynesian consensus. And yet, as Derek Gillard repeatedly demonstrates in his history of education in England, the executors of this ostensibly egalitarian policy — the Labour Party — retained a deeply confused attitude towards education and class from the very start, which greatly hampered any efforts to equalize society through education. On the one hand, the party was motivated by a sense of egalitarianism and levelling the playing field for the working classes, but on the other, they

still essentially accepted as normal the idea of “natural” class divides in the education system, and hence society as a whole. This was reflected in the fact that the 1944 Education Act also provided for a tripartite school system of “grammar schools” for the most academically able (entry decided by the eleven-plus exam taken at aged eleven), “technical schools” for skilled trades and “secondary modern” schools for everyone else. From the get go, although the mass public education system was based on “ability”, inevitably this school system reinforced a *de facto* class divide based around which type of school one attended.

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of grammar school pupils came from working-class backgrounds. Yet within the grammar school system, the home background and the social origins of the pupils continued to have the main bearing on pupil performance and life chances, and the children of the burgeoning professional-managerial classes (a category used in the Gurney-Dixon report into the class composition of grammar school pupils) dominated academic performance, with the children of semi-skilled and unskilled workers tending to struggle. So, even grammar schools, the most effective tools for social mobility the UK has ever seen, still could not overcome the effects of class and deprivation, and pre-existing class divides were reproduced even in a form of school that, on paper, was meant to abolish unfair advantage. Moreover, while the grammar schools were undoubtedly *seen* as a vehicle for social mobility, the actual social mobility of working-class children was limited, with the children of the professionals tending to go onto further education.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> While further education was still rare and specialized, under 8% of the children of unskilled workers went onto further education following grammar school (with under 2% of boys), while 33% of the children of the professional-managerial classes did.

schools were low-class  
divided

Secondary  
modern  
as  
dumping  
ground

Secondary modern schools, on the other hand, which were attended by three-quarters of all children, became seen as a "dumping ground", particularly for the children of unskilled workers, and therefore as somewhere to be avoided at all costs by those with aspirations of social mobility. Despite the largely illusory nature of social mobility, educational divides between grammars and secondary moderns nonetheless became a common tool for class distinction within society and between the lower classes in particular. Respectable and aspirational working-class and petty-bourgeois families cherished the idea of the grammar and looked down on the secondary modern children.

1953-54  
comprehensive

Increasing concerns about the unfairness of grammar schools eventually led to them being scrapped (by Labour MPs who had, of course, attended them). The 1953 Labour Party manifesto promised to abolish selective schooling and, in 1954, the first "comprehensive school" opened. The election of a Labour government in 1964 saw the gradual introduction of the comprehensive system, which was designed — on paper at least — to again try and level the playing field. The move to comprehensivization in the UK was strongly opposed by right-wing educationalists and Tories, who published a series of influential critiques of the "progressive" changes — some deeming it "the egalitarian threat" — known as "the Black Papers".

1979  
collapse

During the "winter of discontent" (1978-79), the collapsing Labour government, like many a developing nation, was pressured into accepting an IMF loan. As Gillard details, in return it agreed to make cuts to public spending, which in turn impacted on education. As the crisis bit, throughout the late 1970s teacher unions became noticeably militant, striking on numerous occasions alongside members of manual unions. Not coincidentally, moral panics about the "low standards" of comprehensive

1970s  
militant  
teacher  
unions

(they were  
in from  
up the back)

educ system  
DAN EVANS  
comprehensives as slums

education then began to emerge in the right-wing media: comprehensives were slums, the children illiterate, unruly, violent, with the teachers' "progressive methods" failing to raise standards and so on. Typically, rather than withstanding these moral panics, Labour capitulated, with Prime Minister Jim Callaghan joining in the criticisms of the comprehensive system, seemingly endorsing the views of the notorious "Black Papers" written against comprehensives in the process.

Faced with the narrative of failing comprehensives, early neoliberal views about "teacher accountability" and "parental choice" began to inexorably seep into Labour's own approach to education. Clyde Chitty argues persuasively that the end of the post-war social-democratic consensus took root firmly in the education system as early as 1976, which meant that, when Thatcher was elected in 1979, her campaign against the state system was made a lot easier.

As a previous education secretary, education was central to Thatcher's hegemonic strategy, and would become a laboratory in which the previously niche ideas of the new right (i.e., neoliberalism) could be incubated and spread throughout society. Keith Joseph, Thatcher's closest ally and arguably the chief domestic intellectual force behind Thatcherism, was made education secretary precisely because education was seen as central to changing the common sense of society.

Joseph

Thatcher was passionately opposed to the collapse of the grammar school system and the rise of comprehensives, but by the time she took power, comprehensivization was too far gone — by the mid-Eighties, the majority of schools were comprehensives — and could not be undone, so all she could do was protect the remaining grammars. Unable to undo comprehensivization, neoliberal policies had to saturate the existing comprehensive system as it was. Thus

“traditional values” were pushed within the curriculum, exemplified by the Section 28 clause that attacked the discussion of homosexuality in sex education, dishonestly presenting it as “promoting” homosexuality. In addition, brutal cuts were made to the education budget. Teachers’ pay was cut and unions were attacked. An ideology of parental choice and competition between schools was championed, and social mobility was championed through the “assisted places” scheme, which aimed to allow tiny numbers of “brighter” children to leave their “sink schools” to attend private schools.

As Thatcher gradually shored up her position within the Conservative Party — and society was dragged to the right behind her — Tory policies and interventions in education became increasingly radical. The transformation of education culminated in the 1988 Education Reform Act, which Ken Jones describes as “the major achievement of educational Conservatism”:

Not only did it change the institutional pattern of schooling, but it also substantially modified its social relations and reshaped its values, meanings and objectives. To put things more strongly, it destroyed the educational culture which had developed between 1944 and 1979, and began the work of creating a different one, in which old “social actors” were marginalised and new ones rendered powerful. What it created was successful: it established enduring ground rules for schooling in the 1990s and beyond.

Clyde Chitty argues that this was the final ideological break with the post-war consensus and marked the total capture of education as a sector — and as a concept — by neoliberalism. Nowhere (other than perhaps housing) was the societal and institutional cultural shift to the right more reflected as in education: the very concepts

of knowledge and education swiftly shifted from a public good to a commodity for the individual to hoard. Schools and universities became sites of competition against one another. The working class, who Thatcher despised, were left to rot, and anyone who had any sense would be trying their best to escape them.

### New Labour's Legacy

John Major's tenure as Prime Minister represented something of an interregnum, and in education (as in all fields) the role of his government was primarily to reinforce the changes put in place by his predecessor. While in broad societal terms New Labour represented a continuation of Thatcherism, they also made a number of distinctive interventions in the education system that reshaped the British class structure and the relationships between classes within it.

Like Thatcher, Tony Blair also saw himself as a revolutionary, and similarly saw education as a pillar of his hegemonic project. Even before he was in government, Blair's focus for societal reform was, in his words, based on the slogan “education, education, education”. Before he got into power, he had played to the Labour left and had promised to abandon selection for all secondary schools, a long-term source of class divisions. Of course, when in power, Blair's educational policies retained much of Thatcher's neoliberal logic (even if it was rhetorically now implemented for egalitarian ends instead of openly embracing inequality).

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Blair — and all subsequent Labour leaders — became obsessed with the idea that schools could compensate for and solve all the ills of society. Under the banner of solving poverty and facilitating social mobility, competition between schools

and pupils was deepened with the introduction of school "league tables" and the reintroduction of testing. Parental choice was now the name of the game, and hence school league tables were necessary so middle-class parents, as consumers, would know which school would be best for their children, and know which schools to avoid.

Education policy was enforced by fanatical Blairites like David Blunkett and later Andrew Adonis. Blunkett lambasted "non-traditional" teaching methods and regurgitated Black Paper rhetoric about the dangers of it. In a damning indictment of New Labour, his obsessive focus on a return to "traditional" prescriptive teaching methods was seen as too authoritarian, even by the original authors of the Black Papers. But while teaching methods had to remain "traditional", the subjects had to be "modernized". As part of the transition to the "knowledge economy", under New Labour things like enterprise, business and entrepreneurship became embedded in schools. The curriculum narrowed to focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths), literacy and numeracy, while subjects that could not support the knowledge economy were marginalised and defunded. Labour's zealous belief in social mobility led to huge pressures being placed on teachers and schools to achieve increasingly impossible demands, particularly as the wider economy and society left thousands of families struggling to cope.

School policy ultimately reflected New Labour's version of progressive neoliberalism, in which socially liberal politics were combined with brutal authoritarianism and the paternalism of the professional-managerial classes that motivated the entire project. Thus, on the one hand, the homophobic Section 28, which was introduced by Thatcher, was repealed; and yet, on the other hand, education was increasingly sucked into Blair's shameless crusade on

the "feckless" working class. Government-backed drug-testing was brought into schools, mass campaigns against truancy were launched and he introduced the Islamophobic Prevent policy, which attempted to make schools part of the repressive state apparatus.

Of particular significance for the deepening of class divisions within the state education system was the promotion of academic selection within comprehensives. In 1995, David Blunkett had promised the Labour Party conference: "Read my lips. No selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government", signalling to Labour's supporters a clean break with the grammar system and hence class divisions in education. Yet after being elected, Labour not only supported grammar schools, it accepted and promoted selection of pupils on academic aptitude by state schools. As Blair himself put it, comprehensive schools should "cease meaning the same for all", and so New Labour then pursued a policy of transforming "failing" schools by making them "specialist colleges" that would allow academic selection.

The narrative that comps were "failing" led to the eventual introduction of "academies" — autonomous, state-funded schools that were no longer run by local authorities, placing them instead in the hands of charities and businesses who, in return for financial sponsorship, could control the board of governors, influence the curriculum and so on. This was a classic case study of privatisation, justified by Blunkett as the market stepping in reluctantly to save "failing" schools (i.e., we had no choice). Chitty argues that the new academies were, effectively, "private schools paid for by the state", although unlike the classic liberal values of the private school system that historically developed the individual without the constraints of employability, these new privately run but publicly funded schools would be driven by a neoliberal, KPI, jobs-market orientation. Their



How relevant  
schools matter  
drive

Comprehensives Proc

introduction marked Labour's final, total break with the ideal type of universalist state education that underpinned the welfare state and formalized the privatisation of state education.

As ever during the Blair years, academization was brought back to the need to speed up social mobility, stopping a cycle of "low expectations" among the working class. Gillard recounts how Adonis explicitly stated that he wanted academies to be "the new grammar schools", offering a path out of poverty for (a few) bright but disadvantaged children.

Glaring class divides — which had previously largely been between the secondary modern and grammar system, and between the state system and the private system — were now formally built within the state system itself with the abandoning of comprehensivization. This was not an accident, however, and was the result of political calculations. Blair understood his electoral base very well, and enshrining class segregation within the ostensibly unified education system, while devastating for the working class, had the specific aim of helping the professional-managerial classes and upwardly mobile new petty bourgeoisie. For Chitty, the education initiatives of the Blair years "seemed to involve the creation of many new types of secondary school, which would attract the support of the middle and aspirant classes, and thereby help to secure the government's new electoral base."

The formal stratification of comprehensives by either selection or academization allowed progressive professional or aspirational lower middle-class parents — people who were outwardly in favour of state schools and who probably openly abhorred the concept of private education at dinner parties — to circumnavigate "failing" schools, which were overwhelmingly in areas of high poverty, and send their kids to what were effectively private schools (with hardly

any free school meals-eligible children). (This is, of course, what the Blairs themselves did with their son, Euan.)

Like Thatcher, these policies endorsed and accepted the idea that certain comprehensives were sink schools for the growing underclass. While Thatcher perhaps more honestly encouraged "smart children" to leave the state system and escape to the private school system, New Labour instead went about creating opt-outs within the state system for the professional-managerial classes, while the lower orders were left to rot in their failing schools. On the ground, of course, this "rigid hierarchy of [state] schools" served chiefly to undermine the Blairite rhetoric of "equality of opportunity", and to sharpen class divisions and insecurities as class divides between schools and places became more visible. The grammar school system was no longer in place, but education and what school you went to or sent your kids to became supremely important for the aspirational classes and to everyday class divides.

Finally, central to New Labour's focus on social mobility, as well as its zealous belief in the UK's transition to a post-industrial "knowledge economy" — populated by "knowledge workers" — was a huge expansion of higher education. Thatcher's regime had tampered with higher education — introducing fees for international students and tightening research criteria, for example — but had certainly not been interested in expanding higher education to the lower orders. Indeed, she *cut* funding to universities. The expansion of higher education under New Labour was therefore an enormous structural change that has had profound implications for the class structure of British society. Predictably, for all the egalitarian rhetoric about expanding opportunity, the mass expansion of higher education inevitably led to a crisis in how to fund it. This led to the abolition of maintenance grants (free university) and the eventual introduction of tuition fees

sink schools  
Cipriani

new  
education  
class  
divides

in 1998, a move Labour had — of course — strenuously opposed before taking office, and which had previously been proposed, unsuccessfully, by Keith Joseph.

Thus, just as the state sector was privatized, by introducing tuition fees the higher education sector was also privatized. This had enormous effects on the character of higher education, which will be discussed later on.

By the time the Tory-led coalition entered government in 2010, the state education sector had been turned into a bewildering mosaic of different types of school. The most significant change within education since the 2010 Tory-Lib Dem coalition — later continued by the Tories on their own — has been the introduction of austerity measures, which have predictably devastated education as they have every other part of life in Britain. The Tories cut the school building programme, cut school meals budgets and cut the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). Despite adopting the language of social mobility, the Tories have returned to their original position of helping their traditional base and leaving everyone else to rot. Under Theresa May, the Tories expanded the grammar school system, thereby returning to the formal class divides within education promoted by Thatcher. State school funding was slashed while funding for private schools has risen enormously. The A\* grade was introduced at A-Level, representing a further barrier in access to university for children from poorer areas, and university fees jumped from £3000 to £9000 in a single year.

### Class Inequalities Within Education: The Marginalisation of the Working Class

Today, the class inequalities that were already latent within the education system have magnified. Schools have been

expected to do more work with less money, leaving the teaching profession on its knees. The class divides that formerly occurred between grammars and secondary moderns are now occurring within the state system. Class divides are glaring between schools, typically mediated by geography. Schools in nice areas have no or very low numbers of children on free school meals or with Special Educational Needs, as well as modern buildings and facilities, while schools in working-class areas have obscenely high levels of children receiving free schools and with Special Educational Needs, with buildings that are falling down and staff shortages. Schools in deprived areas often now resemble huge anti-poverty centres, hosting wrap-around child-care provision, breakfast clubs, providing free school meals, free school uniforms, psychiatrists, doctors and nurses, social workers and so on.

Despite the never-ending surfeit of policies designed to end poverty and aid social mobility, things have gotten worse. This is consistent with all the evidence that you cannot teach your way out of poverty. By every measure, the working class are being increasingly marginalized within education. Poorer children remain far less likely to get good GCSEs compared to those with more affluent parents. More acutely, the most deprived children — those receiving free school meals, a crude but fairly accurate proxy for “working-class children” — achieve terribly at GCSEs. A 2019 Sutton Trust report showed that, in 2018, nearly 50% of the most disadvantaged children did not get an A-C grade (a “standard pass”) in maths or English — a huge barrier to accessing many occupations later in life.

Many working-class students do not even take GCSEs in the first place but instead opt for other vocational qualifications. If you *do* take GCSEs, what subject you take at GCSE is also overwhelmingly determined by your class and your horizons and expectations in life, which will be

already be set by the time children pick their choices at age fourteen. Poorer kids take subjects like Health and Social Care and avoid STEM subjects and the arts. Unsurprisingly, working-class kids leave school as soon as possible, and a 2019 Children's Commissioner report showed that, in the UK in 2018, 37% of children receiving free school meals left school without basic qualifications.

Working-class non-engagement with education has occupied sociologists for over a century. Discussions of educational performance in the modern press often replicate the attitudes of Victorian reformers in their view of the working class.

There are a lot of reasons why working-class children struggle in school. As children had to work from home during COVID, it came as a shock to many people to learn that many did not have a dedicated space in the house where they could do homework, did not have iPads or laptops, and had parents who were too busy working to help them with their schoolwork. Class produces "hidden injuries" — ultimately, you will struggle to engage with school if you're stressed and upset that your parents are fighting or your dad has gone to jail, or your relatives are unwell or you have unpaid carer duties, or any number of the traumatic incidents that the working class (of all races and ethnicities) disproportionately experience. Poverty is traumatic and dealing with it is difficult for children, let alone then having to face the relentless testing regime in school. Poorer children face stigma because of their poor uniform, the shoes and the coats they wear, the fact they receive free school meals and so on. All these factors can simply make school an extremely miserable experience.

For decades, the working class — unlike other classes — have had no political patron. Working-class communities have been hollowed out; the steady jobs that people used to rely are no more. Children have eyes and they are not

stupid: if someone tells you can work hard, bust your ass at exams (with little or no help at home) and then go to university, when everyone you know has not gone to university or even done A-Levels, and you can see there are either no jobs in your town, or certainly none which require degrees, it is unlikely you'll care or listen or respond to the promises about delayed gratification and learning how to pass exams. You may also have seen or worked with recent graduates laden in debt and angry at false promises.

What is also frequently missed in the handwringing over the working class's "lack of aspiration" is that even when working-class children *do* want to go to university, or to become doctors or architects, these aspirations are rapidly managed. As Jessie Abrahams' research has shown, in school they are frequently told that that path is not for them. "Why don't you try something a little bit more realistic?"

Yet again, as C. Wright Mills repeatedly argues, this handwringing assumes that working-class people and communities *want* the same life and career — have the same "aspirations" — as the middle classes, when this simply isn't the case. School simply isn't seen as relevant for many of the roles that working-class kids will eventually take up in society. If you want to be a builder or a plumber, you will get most of your training on the job. Children realise this. Many pupils also realise the current market situation of jobs like construction to be very strong, so not being interested in overly academic subjects is entirely rational as it's eminently possible to build a very good life for yourself, living in your own community with your mates without worrying too much about school and having to go to university. This perspective is, of course, entirely alien to other classes (and social mobility "tsars") who wish to "get on" and get out, and who can only see success and

destr. of local  
community

the good life in their own terms. Who on earth would want to stay in their small town and be next to their families? How parochial and narrow minded. Hence, these entirely rational life plans are often seen by other classes as lacking "aspiration".

It is also certainly true that the institutional habitus of the school generally clashes with the habitus and culture (i.e., behaviours, worldview and norms) of the working class and the roles they do in society in countless ways. Generally speaking, the jobs and roles that the working class often take up in society do not require (or even value or respect) the social practices, behaviours and values that school and the white-collar workplace teaches you — deference, seriousness, work as a place where laughter and humour is parked and a new face and personality is put on (regardless of how many pool tables or beanbags are placed in the breakroom). The famous book *Learning to Labour*, which explores why working-class pupils get the same working-class jobs as their parents, argues that working-class children are primarily socialized outside school — in their community and family — and the personal qualities that are treasured in this milieu (e.g., wit, strength, camaraderie) are rooted in the workplaces of their parents. Hence, it is natural for working-class children to reject the norms, values and expectations that are imposed upon them in school. Precisely because of this glaring culture and values clash — whether it be how teachers or other kids talk to them — working-class children become aware of their own class via school, and soon realize that school and what it represents is not for them. They reject school as a place that is to be endured and finished as soon as possible.

w/c  
ch.  
8/v.  
school

✓

## School and the Creation of the New Petty Bourgeoisie

While school is not seen as relevant to working-class children, it is relevant for the intermediate classes, and for the new petty bourgeoisie in particular. Education is the primary site where the new petty bourgeoisie and the working class are split off from one another and whereby the social, cultural and ideological class boundaries between the two groups — outlined in the previous chapter — are first created.

To understand the function of school and its special role in forging the new petty bourgeoisie as a class, it is important to emphasize that, for other classes, education is primarily about reproducing and maintaining their position in society. The "fundamental" classes of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in particular are static and do not change class. They are not mobile — they don't move up or down. Therefore it doesn't matter that the children of the bourgeoisie get bad grades — for example, a Royal getting Ds with class sizes of eight and the best tuition money can buy — because these kids aren't ever falling out of their class position; it just doesn't happen. School is where they go to confirm their place in the elite, just as it always has been, and accordingly, the actual subjects and qualifications you get taught are secondary. What matters is learning and developing contacts that you will use for life, and the bearing of the ruling class: their unshakeable self-belief and confidence and the ability to bluff and charm people, even if you don't have a clue what you're talking about. The experience of the professional-managerial class is slightly different. One of the ways in which they are split off from the bourgeois proper is the fact they have to actually care about education. The ruling class can take over their daddy's business (or country) with no qualifications,

static  
class

petty bourgeois  
the elite // Education is the bearing of the ruling class

but you can't simply inherit being a lawyer or doctor: you have to actually gain qualifications, go to university, pass exams and so on. You will have a massive advantage over the working class and the petty bourgeoisie in obtaining these, but you do still have to pass things.

Equally, for the working class, it doesn't really matter what grades you get if you are going to work in Amazon, or on-site, or with your dad or cousin or uncle, or join the army. The imposition of alien values onto the working class, and their subsequent rejection of the logic of school and the "chance" of social mobility, of course ultimately serves to reproduce the class structure and the working class's lowly place within it. It ensures the class remains static. School therefore reproduces the position of the working class, albeit less consciously than private school (i.e., it is reproduced "negatively" for the working class).

The petty bourgeoisie's relationship with education has historically been complex. Historically, the traditional petty bourgeoisie rejected the logic of formal education, preferring common sense and learning on the job (often the family business) — something they shared with the proletariat. Thus, education — and its attendant culture and habitus — has traditionally been one of the ways in which the different fractions of the petty bourgeoisie were separated. On the other hand, the traditional petty bourgeoisie, because of their emphasis on social mobility and class distinction, regularly encouraged their own children to engage with the education system that they themselves rejected, creating an intergenerational trend whereby the new petty bourgeoisie were often the offspring of the self-employed. Today, the old fraction of the petty bourgeoisie increasingly do attend university (mainly business schools), but educational divides are still most important for the new fraction, and it is this new fraction that is focused on in this chapter.

As the previous chapter demonstrated, just like the old petty bourgeoisie, the new petty bourgeoisie's main obsession and overriding concern in life is how to get on; and equally, they are continuously and desperately trying to avoid slipping down into the class they are closest to and from where many of them originated.

Education, as C. Wright Mills put it, is an "elevator" that can take the new petty bourgeoisie where they want to go in life, and education therefore assumes a disproportionate role in the life of the new petty bourgeoisie as one of the central mechanisms of "getting on". Mills argues that education is more important to the new petty bourgeoisie than property was to the old petty bourgeoisie. So, while education for other classes is about reproduction, for the new petty bourgeoisie it is disproportionately important and actually creates the class by splitting it off from other classes.

### "Mental Labour"

In the previous chapter, I briefly introduced some of the ways in which Poulantzas argued the new petty bourgeoisie was split off from the working class. One of his key theories is the recurring (and somewhat nebulous) concept of "mental labour". Poulantzas repeatedly argues that it is "mental labour" that primarily distinguishes this new class from the working class within society.

My interpretation of mental labour is one that can be read narrowly or expansively. The narrow reading is basically that the new petty bourgeoisie and the working class simply have different habituses. In his discussion of technicians and engineers, for example, Poulantzas writes that

the dominant ideology does not just exist in "ideas"...

but is embodied and realized in a whole series of material practices, rituals, know-how, etc., which also exist in the production process. The technological applications of science are here directly present as a materialization of the dominant ideology.

In effect, what Poulantzas is saying here is that the new petty bourgeoisie, regardless of their earnings, even if they are not in a position of direct authority or domination *vis à vis* the working class, possesses a different habitus to the working class. The problem, however, is that it is unclear what the habitus of the new petty bourgeoisie is, other than "not being like the working class".

A more expansive reading of the concept is of both symbolizing and constituting a deeper, social, cultural and ideological divide, which is strong enough to split the new petty bourgeoisie (and, indeed, all other subordinate classes) off from the working class. Mental labour for Poulantzas is not simply about "blue-collar versus white-collar", or "clean work versus dirty work", or "skilled versus unskilled labour", or even the possession of educational qualifications versus not having them, but instead involves something much deeper again. Mental labour represents an unspoken, social and ideological dividing line in society, based on the legitimacy and superiority of certain types of knowledge. This dividing line is the "concrete manifestation of the political and ideological elements in the structural determination of class". This is a widely understood but unspoken and intangible line in society between the working class ("them") and everyone else ("us"), which plays a key role in a class-divided society. Poulantzas makes it clear that mental labour *is what workers do not have*. It is being on the side of "mental labour" that fundamentally splits off the new petty bourgeoisie from the working class. The new petty bourgeoisie, regardless of how little

they earn or however much they become proletarianized, are always on the other side of the mental labour dividing line "with respect to the working class". To the new petty bourgeoisie, the working class are "them", and this is mutually understood.

For Poulantzas, it is education that, more than any other field, splits the new petty bourgeoisie off from the proletariat, and school is one of the places in society where his concept of the mental/manual divide becomes most tangible.

### Learning How to Obey

Historically, schools have reproduced capitalism and the class structure in two ways. The first is *formal*, through the curriculum. So, at the most basic level, if we viewed school crudely as a place where our current hegemonic ideology was simply passed on to children through the curriculum, then it is clear that the ideology of competition, business, entrepreneurship (and the individualism that these promote) are certainly formalized in the British school curriculum and have been since the 1970s. The idea that social mobility is good, and that the primary focus and aim of schools is to get kids to pass exams, that the best thing that can happen to a working-class child would be to go on to university, is by now hegemonic within the education system. That education should be a vehicle for social mobility is explicitly stated in government documents and enshrined in curricula across the UK, and many state schools in poor areas are explicitly oriented to this end, with a massive focus every year on increasing the amount of children who go to university, with the dream of getting some into Oxbridge.

In order to prove you can do the tasks that the "knowledge economy" requires and get a good job, you

the new petty bourgeoisie?

need standardized exams. The "intermediate" classes who form the new petty bourgeoisie — school teachers, nurses, social workers — see education and the accumulation of qualifications as central to the (stressful) process of social mobility. The new petty bourgeoisie require certain skills and qualifications to be able to take up their place in the class structure and to hopefully move up it. You need GCSEs and A-Levels — and an enormous amount of emphasis and stress is placed on getting the right ones.

The second way that capitalism is reproduced is *informal* — through the social relations, norms and values of school and education that exist beyond the formal curriculum. Success in school of course involves technical qualifications — doing the right GCSEs, staying on for A-Level and going to university — but on the whole, children are taught that their success and their social mobility is not simply predicted on technical expertise and formal qualifications, but instead on the possession of things inculcated in the "hidden curriculum" — the nebulous "competencies", qualities and values that they must cultivate for the roles that they wish to take up.

very hard

Thus, more important than GCSEs or A-Levels is learning the rules of how to succeed in the white-collar world: not just how to pass exams but the importance of exams themselves, the value of hard work and delayed gratification, working to deadlines, completing tasks on your own in isolation. Formal credentials and qualifications — whether it is your degree or A-Levels — of course often have no bearing at all on whether you can do the job. Instead, achieving these targets are more important for what they say about your loyalty and adherence to a set of values, which dovetail with the capitalist system. Children thus learn how to behave appropriately and, above all, how to defer to authority. Althusser states:

and to be obedient

But besides these techniques and knowledges, and in learning them, children at school also learn the "rules" of good behaviour, i.e. the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job he is "destined" for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. They also learn to "speak proper French", to "handle" the workers correctly, i.e. actually (for the future capitalists and their servants) to "order them about" properly, i.e. (ideally) to "speak to them" in the right way, etc.

To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e., a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class "in words".

Children who deviate from or question these deferential qualities — primarily working-class children — are punished, and "the others" learn that you must not be like that under any circumstances.

The anecdote at the start of this chapter is somewhat misleading, and omits my own role in the dissolution of my friendship. The fact is, as secondary school progressed, I remember gradually becoming terrified of sitting with my friends from primary school in class. They'd sit at the back, mess around, talk while the teacher was talking, answer the teacher back, make wisecracks. I, on the other hand, had been taught to sit obediently and to learn and was increasingly terrified of getting in trouble, because I

knew that school was the key to my future. I couldn't get my head round the lack of respect they had for authority and how little they cared about school — *didn't they realise how important this was?* Thus, when we did get separated into sets, I was somewhat relieved that I would no longer get "dragged down" with them. I could now focus and be a good boy and impress the teachers with no distractions.

In the early 1950s, C. Wright Mills identified the distinct qualities that white-collar workers had to cultivate and learn from an early age. He claimed that, while the self-employed were entrepreneurial and focused on making short-term profits for their business, the new petty bourgeoisie were also entrepreneurial, but in a different way. He argued that every white-collar worker developed the personality of a salesman, but rather than selling a product or trying to make profit, over their lifecourse they learn to *sell themselves* and their personal qualities in the "personality market". In this market, of course, we are in competition with others. The school thus inculcates in the new petty bourgeoisie the ideology mentioned in the previous chapter, which was contrasted with the working class: a need to rise to the top as *individuals*, a view of the world in which others are a threat, competition. In school we are taught that we are the most important person in the world, that we are special and that getting ahead and selling ourselves (ahead of others) is crucial. In school, children learn the competitive individualism that leaves them isolated from others, sat on their own desks, hiding their answers from their friends, putting their hand up in class, trying to be first.

### The Ideological Split

So, in school, the new petty bourgeoisie learn the qualities of deference, individualism and all the things they need to

succeed and climb the ladder. But Poulantzas — through the concept of mental labour — argues school is about more again than just learning new modes of behaviour, than someone being quiet and persistent and listening to the teacher and another not listening and not bothering with homework. It is the manifestation of a deeper ideological divide.

Educationalists, particularly anarchists like Francisco Ferrer, have long argued that there is an informal but deep-rooted split within the school system between "mental" and "manual" education. At an early age, children are divided into different streams based on whether they are academic or "non-academic". Some kids are encouraged to subjects like Design & Technology, some are encouraged to do arts, humanities and sciences, and so on, and these traditionally corresponded to wider societal class divides. The new petty bourgeoisie — those just above the proletariat — who go on to work in white-collar roles, are overwhelmingly shuffled into the "mental" (academic) path in school and rapidly begin climbing to the top of the pile. While educational theorists have historically focused on how this split and the societal prioritization of particular forms of "intelligence" deprives children of a holistic education — that is, it deprives working-class children of a chance to engage with high culture and turns "academic" children into helpless adult-children with no practical skills — Althusser and Poulantzas focus on the ideological consequences of this split and the impact it has on the subordinate classes' relationship to one another.

Being sorted into the "academic" stream in school is central to the early socialization of the new petty bourgeoisie. This is not just narrowly about who passes what subject, who is in set one or set four, who passes their exams and who doesn't, who leaves school at sixteen and who stays on to go to university; it is also about accepting



the deeper notion that particular types of knowledge and the forms of behaviour that are valued in school — the forms that *we* have, but the working-class kids lack — are not just important for getting ahead in school, but also that these qualities and forms of knowledge — deference, hard work, etc. — are valuable and correct within society more generally.

This has a vital *relational* aspect — accepting these rules and norms (that allow you to succeed in school), while others reject them, tells you that you are different to the other children, that you know more, that you are better than them both in terms of the things you know and the way you behave. In other words, being put in the top set for everything has social, cultural and ideological effects: we are in set one because we are brighter; we have certain qualities that they don't. They don't know what we do; they can't behave like us. Success in school, climbing to the top of this small ladder, inexorably leads the new petty bourgeoisie to believe in the justness of hierarchy, competition and social mobility more generally. And after all, why wouldn't they? School is ostensibly a "meritocracy" and they tend to do well in school because they possess these qualities. They hence accept and internalize the rules of the game.

Absorbing and accepting that this form of knowledge and intelligence — this way of being is superior and fundamentally different from the proletariat — is a prerequisite of learning your place in society (we know who we are by knowing who we are not) and forming new aspirations and expectations based on this. This includes learning that certain jobs (i.e., manual, low-paid work) are "not for us", alongside the related, implicit assumption that they *are* for "others" — i.e., those who don't have the qualities we do. The widespread belief, even among "progressives", that certain forms of knowledge are superior is a component of capitalist ideology because the

taken-for-granted acceptance of the superiority of "mental labour" ultimately justifies hierarchy and class divides throughout society. We accept that some people are where they are because they know more, or they know better, and others are where they are because they lack the relevant qualities or forms of knowledge.

Accepting and internalizing these rules and norms in order to succeed, but also learning that the working classes are different to and inferior to us, is why the petty bourgeoisie, later in life, accept and enforce the laws of the bureaucracy or the white-collar world. Preparation for their role and function in society — their willingness to climb the bureaucratic ladder, and their career of enforcement and domination over the working class, as well as their fundamental difference to them — begins in school.

### University: The Top of the Educational Elevator

When universities were for a small minority of the population, the economy was based on manufacturing rather than services, and when the class structure was a lot simpler, the sorting function of universities within society was more obvious. The expansion of participation in universities since the late-Nineties has been a hugely significant development that has had profound but complex effects on the class structure.

In the 1950s and 1960s, when the British economy was based on industrial capitalism, university was a minority pursuit. In the second half of the twentieth century, as capital reached a particular level of development and increasingly required particular managerial skills to operate successfully, universities became essential for growing, training and socializing the newly formed — but at that stage relatively small — professional-managerial classes. It was necessary for those who had to manage industry or

learn how to improve production (engineers, scientists, bankers, accountants) and for those who had to ensure the ideological and social reproduction of society (teachers, doctors, social workers), but no one else.

There was a limited amount of upward social mobility for children who went to grammar schools, but this was still a minority experience. In the 1950s, only 3% of the population went to university. University participation grew, although participation in higher education in general remained relatively low — at around 15% — right up until the 1990s, when it began to dramatically rise and then skyrocket under New Labour, as Blair set a target of getting 50% of all pupils into higher education.

Today, there are over 2.5 million students in higher education. The university sector is now a bloated behemoth and a huge driver of the UK economy. Universities bring £95 billion a year to the economy and employ 815,000 people. In major cities, they are huge employers as well as landlords, owning large tracts of land and housing. The sector is beset with all the usual hazards of privatization: an increase in bureaucracy, hollowing out of job security, rising mental health problems among staff and students under ever more pressure to succeed, and more besides. Universities are neoliberal hell-holes for everyone involved in them.

Despite the “progressive case for fees” being written by those with a vested interest in the university-industrial complex (the more fees you charge, the more money the university has to expand access programmes, the more working-class kids can come), the original hopes of “widening access” did not last, and nor could they. In response to the introduction of fees, UCAS reported an immediate fall in the number of working-class university applications. In effect, the door for working-class social mobility slammed shut almost as soon as it had been

opened. Today, very few working-class children actually go to university, and they certainly do not go to elite universities. Most working-class children continue to leave school at sixteen. Only approximately 10% of the most disadvantaged children go to university; according to UCAS's own latest reports, advantaged applicants are currently nearly fourteen times as likely to enter university as the most disadvantaged.

The reality is that university is still overwhelmingly for the better-off sections of society and only a very small percentage of the student population come from poorer backgrounds. Russell Group universities are dominated by the professional-managerial classes, while the deprived students who *do* manage to somehow access higher education, against all the odds, overwhelmingly tend to go to less prestigious universities (children who are not eligible for free school means are three times more likely to go to more prestigious universities than those who do), instead going to universities they are geographically close to, often not leaving home while they study for financial reasons. Theirs is a very different “student experience” to everyone else's.

However, not every one of the 2.5 million students are from the elite. The expansion of higher education has been significant primarily because it has seen the new petty bourgeoisie (as opposed to the working class) enter university in large numbers. It is new petty-bourgeois families, concerned with upward mobility, who will shell out for student fees, believing in social mobility (the other demographic that has benefited from the expansion of higher education are less academic rich kids, who will now always be able to find a place somewhere as long as they can pay).

For many new petty-bourgeois entrants to university, getting there is the culmination of the path you were placed

on in school. As one of the "smart kids", this is where you belong, or have at least been encouraged to think you belong. Many probably couldn't wait to get away from their small town and their parochial friends and family, who they were taught to think they were so different to. Many of the skills that were developed in school — working hard to pass exams, for instance — now come into their own. While as a child their main way of marking themselves out from their peers was educational prowess, as they reach early adulthood in university, they can now add to this a plethora of aesthetic and cultural markers, as well as more subtle forms of distinction: changes to their personality — a new accent maybe; new tastes, new fashion; progressive politics. Moreover, *geographic* mobility — for years a corollary of social mobility for the professional-managerial classes — is a significant experience that marks this class out from the working class and old petty bourgeoisie, who are traditionally geographically fixed in place (the latter being tied to an area because of a business). The majority of graduates now move from towns to large or medium cities. This has myriad effects, but the fact you've "been away" to university and have experienced the wider world is important for everyday class distinction, allowing the new petty bourgeoisie to become more cosmopolitan and progressive — or at least *believe* that they are — than the people who stayed behind.

Moreover, it is also significant that universities are (and always have been) what Walter Benn Michaels calls the "research and development" arm of neoliberalism. Universities are the "top floor" where capitalist ideology is created and refined before being disseminated into the wider populace. The new cohort of new petty-bourgeois students, including many of those who end up on the left, spend at least three years being immersed in the new, strange culture, language and norms of the professional-

managerial classes, which, as Catherine Liu notes, are hegemonic within the field of higher education. The aspirant new petty bourgeoisie may well absorb the culture of the professional-managerial classes and learn new ways to distance themselves from the working class, particularly on social attitudes. University thus finalizes the social and cultural split with the working class for the upwardly mobile new petty bourgeoisie.

But this is more than the moulding of habitus, more than looking and sounding a bit different and not being able to talk to your old school mates when you see them in the pub over Christmas. Like school, university inculcates ideological effects, which split off the new petty bourgeoisie from the working class: it deepens the "mental labour" divide. As with your GCSEs and A-Levels, getting a degree is not the point. The point is that entering university is designed to firmly place the upwardly mobile individual on one side of a dividing line and to inculcate certain ideological effects in them. Whilst at university, far more even than school, you learn to compete against others. You learn to become *even more* individualistic, how to sell yourself on the job/personality market. You accept the hierarchy; indeed, getting to university in the first place, getting your foot on the first rung on the ladder of success, proves to you that society *is* fair, that the ladder of social mobility *can* be climbed. You are now, in effect, "officially" better than the people and community you left behind. There are few students in higher education who do not internalize this logic of competition and the new role of education and their new place within society.

Yet the effects of university on the new petty bourgeoisie are not uniform. Just like our experiences of state school, the experience of university varies massively depending on what class you are from. For the rich, much like private school, university is either a finishing school or a place to

while away three or four years; a place where you can have a laugh, have some banter, play rugby, shag, drink (now called "the student experience"). But don't work too hard, because after all, it's not important what degree you get — more than likely you will get a "Desmond"<sup>10</sup>, because you are going to be fine anyway: you possess the right connections, you possess the right cultural capital, you don't feel out of place managing people, and even if you do bum around for a while, you're never going to be poor and you're never going to be homeless. You don't care about social mobility, you care about maintaining your position, and for the rich that's what education is all about. For the professional-managerial classes, it involves more studying and training, although they are very well-supported and prepared for their journey — everything is in their favour. You are not likely to mess things up from here.

For the new petty bourgeoisie, however, the experience is more complex. The *established* middle classes (the professional-managerial classes) are defined by *ease* — they are at home in these milieus and don't need to impress anyone. They know they are going to be OK whatever happens and don't have to worry about downward mobility. This is not the case for the new petty bourgeoisie: they can't afford to mess around in university, because the chances are that their parents are paying a lot for their degree; it feels like an enormous sacrifice, and they will be put under far more pressure than their peers. It has been well-researched by now that, despite being one of the "academic" kids in school who from a young age are encouraged to split themselves off from their peers and focus on getting to university, many students from the petty bourgeoisie or working class who do attend universities feel very rapidly like a fish out of water in the rarefied environments of the

10 A 2:2, i.e., a second-class degree.

university. For the first time in higher education, they feel the sting of being the lower class after a lifetime of being the higher class, at least relative to the working class. After a lifetime of realising they are not the working class and are fundamentally different to them, the new petty bourgeoisie at university frequently finds that they are also not part of the professional-managerial classes, and that they may in fact have more in common culturally and socially with the friends, family and communities that they were so desperate to leave all along.

While state schools are frantically focused on teaching to the test, passing exams and getting kids to university, so that they can move up the league tables, it means that many of the new petty bourgeoisie who go to university do not actually possess the same amounts of cultural capital as their new peers. The cruel irony is that, in school, they are *not* generally taught the soft skills that the bourgeoisie and the professional-managerial classes are cultivating at the same time — confidence, leadership, all the qualities that you need to move beyond a certain point on the ladder. The qualities they have been taught — deference, diligence, not making a big deal of yourself — can actually only get you so far.

One of the underexplored manifestations of the cumulative experience of social mobility, even when that is blocked, is on the habitus of the new petty bourgeoisie. In *The Uses of Literacy*, Richard Hoggart outlines how those working-class children who *did* manage to successfully negotiate the grammar school system and experience genuine social mobility then experienced significant dislocation and discomfort. In the name of social mobility, they were encouraged to leave their home and community, shed their old personality and accent and to don a new one, cultivate qualities and values alien to their background and

family, only to end up in an alien middle-class milieu in which they resented everyone.

The notion of habitus is limited when it is constrained by the dominant notions of “working-class habitus” versus “middle-class habitus”, and when it ignores the issues of social and geographical mobility and the complexity of class fractions. It is hard to explain the habitus of the new petty bourgeoisie if we are constrained by thinking in these black-and-white terms. As a result of their social mobility and interstitial position, they may develop — and this is certainly my own experience — a habitus that Bourdieu calls “cleft” or split. The school may socialize the new petty bourgeoisie enough to feel comfortable in university in some ways (e.g., the academic expectations, the rituals of exams and so on), while uncomfortable in others (e.g., other aspects of the university experience and the forms of cultural capital that are drilled into the bourgeois in *their* schools but not in state schools). Simultaneously, they may feel comfortable around the working class who they have grown up around (especially those with working-class family connections), but uncomfortable in others, as the experience of social mobility and the rejection of local, family norms and the immersion in new norms in school and university makes the habitus clash with their background even more acute. Hoggart argues that these poor, socially mobile individuals ended up fitting in nowhere: feeling not entirely at home in their professional milieu, nor in their home communities after a lifetime of consciously distancing oneself from the working class. The cleft habitus leads to a “hysteresis effect” — a persistent anxiety and unease about their social position and place in the world.

Thus, while university completes the socialization of the new petty bourgeoisie and its place on the side of mental labour, continuing the splitting-off from the working class

that was begun in school, it may simultaneously reinforce its liminal position in society and its distance from the elite — in school, they learn they are not working class; at university, many (not all) may learn they are also not the bourgeoisie or the professional-managerial classes.

## Conclusion

Education streams children towards different roles in the social division of production, guiding some students towards BTECs, vocational courses and apprenticeships, whilst guiding others to A-Levels and university. As capitalist society has evolved, so school now functions to socialise the unproductive, white-collar workers of the service economy. Thus, as well as being where the working class inadvertently “learn to labour”, school is also now needed to teach the majority of children (i.e., those above the working class and below the minority that enter the professional-managerial classes) to sell, answer emails, do administrative work, use computers, to learn all the things you need to take up either a bureaucratic or bullshit job within society.

Formal education is disproportionately important for the new petty bourgeoisie compared to the bourgeoisie and the working class, precisely because they are focused on getting ahead in life so as not to fall back into the working class, and education is the elevator that can facilitate this social mobility. Education is where the new petty bourgeoisie is created and where it is split off from the working class ideologically, socially and culturally, and is very helpful for explaining the leap between objective classes or “class on paper” and class consciousness, i.e., how we come to understand our position in society. Therefore, Poulantzas argues, “differences within the education system and

different attitudes towards the function of education are decisive class barriers".

School inculcates the petty-bourgeois attitudes of getting on and differentiating yourself as an individual. Moreover, over many years in the UK, education policy has grown the middle classes and, indeed, this has always been a conscious strategy of the ruling class, who throughout history have used the education system to "seal the "[ideological] alliance" between the middle classes and the bourgeoisie and to stabilize the capitalist system through the ideology of social mobility. This is how successive education policies, including the expansion of higher education, should best be understood. By splitting the subordinate classes, by splitting the new petty bourgeoisie off from the working class in school, by permitting them limited amounts of penetration into institutions designed for the upper classes (universities, the professions), inculcating in them an individualist desire for social mobility — which, of course, obscures any class consciousness as we are encouraged to think like individuals — these classes are prevented from identifying with the working class.

While the new petty bourgeoisie have far better odds of "reaching" the bourgeoisie or professional-managerial classes than the working class, their chances of actually doing this are still largely illusory. Social mobility — the ideology that keeps the middle classes onside — is undoubtedly, and by now quantifiably, a lie — indeed, the great lie of our time. While social mobility saw an absolute increase within the UK for people born between the Fifties and late Seventies (ironically probably helped by the grammar school system), it has objectively declined since then and downward mobility has increased. You are now more likely than ever to stay in the same class you were born in. There are not enough "knowledge economy" jobs for everyone, the white-collar world has been massively

deskilled and the massification of higher education has seen a huge devaluation of degrees, as predicted by C. Wright Mills back in the 1950s.

There is now a huge oversupply of graduates, and graduates are increasingly experiencing unemployment (although nowhere near as high as non-graduates); across the UK, over a third of all graduates are now working in non-graduate roles. This is over four million people with blocked social mobility. Moreover, the movement into graduate roles from this cohort is small, meaning that more and more people are actually getting stuck in non-graduate roles for longer and longer, and for many people this will be forever.

The "graduate premium"<sup>11</sup> remains there for some, but it is also increasingly not for others. On the whole, the graduate premium is stalling: those who enter university rich will leave rich. Outside some professional roles, university — like grammar school — thus cements pre-existing class positions rather than actually improving social mobility.

It is increasingly likely that, of all the classes who go to university, it is the new petty bourgeoisie — those who start off closer to the proletariat, and who may have proletarian families and parents, maybe the first in the family to attend university — who are in fact less likely to prosper and will be proletarianized. Of course, this does not apply to the entire class, but for some members of the newest generations of the class, this will be their experience, and this is likely to increase as the economy tanks. With graduates now loaded up with debt and useless educational qualifications, they are shut out of the housing and job market.

<sup>11</sup> The assumption that over a lifetime, graduates will earn more and have a more comfortable life than non-graduates.

Thus, educational capital can no longer generally provide social mobility; it can no longer be converted into riches or status. Instead, it increasingly remains solely a form of distinction for the new petty bourgeoisie. Like the old petty bourgeoisie, class distinction is of disproportionate importance to the new petty bourgeoisie, as they seek to define themselves against the working class. While the old petty bourgeoisie have traditionally relied on vulgar displays of wealth, of piety and morality or on conservative politics to accomplish this, the new petty bourgeoisie utilises educational qualifications, high-brow cultural capital and many of the behavioural norms and socially progressive views they will have absorbed from their time in the lair of the professional-managerial classes. Yes, you may work in a bar, but you have a degree; you like French films and niche hip-hop; you're an anti-racist and so on.

Ironically, because of their blocked and/or downward social mobility, the new petty bourgeoisie in the modern era experiences the same "status anxiety" that previously defined the traditional petty bourgeoisie. As Mills noted, by basing their prestige and status solely on educational qualifications and skills that are rapidly devalued and largely irrelevant in the world of work beyond school, they "open themselves to a precarious psychological life" that is redolent of old petty bourgeoisie's permanent state of anxiety. For the declassed graduate, "among those who are not allowed to use the educated skills they have acquired, boredom increases, hope for success collapses into disappointment, and the sacrifices that don't pay off lead to disillusionment".

Yet while status anxiety and the threat of downward social mobility — and the need to do anything to prevent this happening — drove the traditional petty bourgeoisie to bitter, reactionary politics, the experience of blocked social mobility has radicalized large swathes

of the new petty bourgeoisie to the left, or at least progressive politics generally speaking. It is unsurprising that Corbynism can trace its lineage back to the student protests of 2010, because that is perhaps when the reality of proletarianization and blocked social mobility began to dawn on many new members of this class. It may also be possible to conceptualize their turn to the "left" — which is, in reality, often simply support for socially liberal politics rather than redistributive ones — as part of the process of distinction, rather than as a genuine socialism or fundamental polarization towards the working class.