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## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

### **Educational failure and working class white children in Britain**

Gillian Evans, 2006

Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan

£16.99 (pbk), 224 pp.

ISBN 1403992169

**Reviewed by Stephanie Jones, Sue Morris and Nick Peim**

### **Rupturing seals: the work of class, research, and pedagogy**

Gillian Evans is a White middle-class mother who lived on a council estate with her Black male partner and two daughters in Bermondsey—a community in London. Her ethnography is filled with narratives about women, men, girls and, particularly, boys in and around the council estate that are analysed through a lens of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These narratives are embedded within various contexts including participants' and the author's flats, council areas, pubs, a classroom and a school playground, and they are focused almost entirely on what Evans calls forms of participation among residents. Additionally Evans weaves her personal experiences throughout the book, a move that makes her positionalities transparent while offering readers a glimpse into the complexities of social class in general, and conducting research across class lines in particular. Two strengths of the book are Evans' reflexive writing and her focus on popular culture within the lives of the boys of Bermondsey. Alongside these contributions are silences that weaken the overall argument that White working-class British children experience educational failure because the forms of participation required in their homes and neighbourhoods do not align with the participation necessary to be successful in school. In this essay I will highlight strengths in Evans' book and attempt to use some of the missing pieces to promote a rethinking of whose lives are allowed to permeate classroom spaces, critical reflexivity in research across social class divides, and class-sensitive pedagogy.

### **Constructing selves on the margins**

The nuanced readings of, and inspired writing about, some of the boys and men in Bermondsey and the social practices required within specific groups are among the strongest chapters in Evans' book (chapters 8, 9 and 10). Rich with ethnographic detail, some historical context and vivid imagery, these chapters leave a reader with visions of the flats, the areas, the pubs, the playground, and the boys and men themselves. Through this in-depth look, readers can learn about hierarchies of the boys'

peer groups and the impact of material goods and popular culture knowledge and capabilities on such hierarchies (i.e. football and Pokemon). Evans writes:

To become valued a person or child has to understand, in any situation, among any group of people, what kind of exchange—in language, gesture or object—ought to be made in order to demonstrate the capacity to participate effectively. (p. 131)

The young boys in Evans' study are portrayed as having much unsupervised time to themselves for riding bikes, playing with friends and moving from area to area on the council estate as they learn about and negotiate various exchanges. Evans argues that an ongoing informal competition for which of the boys will become the 'Big' men on the council promotes the creation of exclusive groupings, verbal assaults and even violence, mostly without adult surveillance or intervention. This kind of social, verbal and physical power wielded by different boys works to position them—from their perspective—as independent and in control of their bodies, minds and reputations.

Interviews with middle-aged Bermondsey men, however, are used to illustrate how a self constructed through power and independence on the streets can clash with the humility presumed necessary to enter the lower rungs of a job market where economic dependency upon employers is inevitable. For some of the men interviewed, the rub of being powerful up against entry-level positions of low-paid and devalued work led to creative engagements in illegal activities. This theme of boys and men feeling they must be somebody different as they enter spaces dominated by middle-class values and expectations (work, school) is a persistent one across the book. For some of the men in the study, incarceration and continued marginalisation from mainstream society was a result of illegal engagements, leading them to critically reflect on what it means to be a boy and a man in Bermondsey and how that might be broadened to open up new possibilities for accepted ways of being.

### **Sealing selves off from school**

When she follows the boys into Tenter Ground, their primary school, Evans documents how the power relations so carefully tended to in the areas of the council estate by the focal boys infiltrate the spaces of their year five/six classroom where teachers and teaching assistants struggle to control the bodies of students—an assumed prerequisite for learning the literacy and numeracy tasks as assigned. Although Evans never describes or analyses the various 'tasks' assigned in the classroom nor what kinds of physical, cognitive, social and cultural practices were deemed necessary to perform successfully, she argues that the difference between boys' forms of participation on the street and those necessary to obtain good marks in the classroom is the fundamental reason for their educational failure in particular, and social reproduction in general (a cultural difference argument made by many, including Heath [1983]).

Chapters six, seven and eight are situated within specific practices around the cultural phenomena of Pokemon in the community and at school, and highlight the assumptions of school authorities (and perhaps Evans) that these students must seal off their outside worlds in order to develop academically. However, Evans'

description and analysis of her personal transformation from alienated adult outsider in the classroom to coveted, powerful insider of the boys' world offer crucial insight to the devastating effects of 'sealing off' personal worlds from academic ones. Evans writes about the boys ignoring her, avoiding eye contact and not responding to her questions throughout the study until she attempts to become a participant within their Pokemon practices when she uses a poster of Pokemon to draw one of the characters. The boys were suddenly interested in Evans and her apparent value as someone who could produce a material good of great worth to them. A surprised Evans asked the school leader's permission to make photocopies of her drawing for everyone in the classroom, even while being afraid she would be perceived as disruptive to what was *supposed* to be happening in school. That same day the teacher allowed Evans and a group of boys to move to an area outside the classroom where they could continue drawing, colouring and talking about Pokemon.

During this time the boys demonstrated facile abilities to engage in multimodal literacy practices (content-specific language, drawing and colouring, and interpretation of signs) that were ignored as legitimate or powerful within the context of school. Instead, their still bodies and quietness as they worked was used to further the classroom teacher's argument that they may need 'special' education in an isolated environment where a teacher would have the time to develop relationships with them and then slowly reintegrate them into the mainstream classroom. Although Evans eloquently explores the surprise factor of her involvement with the boys during the Pokemon scenario, as well as the boys' willingness to slough off their 'surliness' (p. 127) during this particular engagement, she foregoes the opportunity to call for radical change in schooling where working-class and poor lives are constantly expected to be sealed off from what is meaningful and valued in schools.

A critical analysis of which lives are asked to be left at the door when entering school would have enriched the text and perhaps articulated the necessity of a fundamental change in pedagogy that always centres 'high brow' cultural experiences more in line with middle-class and upper-class lives. For example, Evans speaks of her own children who have been promoted through her mothering practices to perceive book learning, or what Evans calls formal learning, as valuable and integrated into their everyday lives. It is doubtful, therefore, that her children would be asked to leave their already-acquired values for book learning behind as they enter the classroom. In fact, it is more likely that educators working with such children will compliment and encourage the bridging of home and school where literacy practices grounded in traditional academics are privileged.

The sealing off of the self from formal educational endeavours, then, seems to be largely the responsibility of working-class and poor children whose learning of language and literacy at home is not valued by the gatekeepers of dominant culture. But is such sealing off actually possible? Or is this the very conundrum working-class and poor children find themselves in as they realise that *being* in a particular classroom requires a kind of *being* with which they may not be familiar, or may even be repulsed by. A significant investigation, then, might be how multiple ways of being can come to be valued in the institution called school—and, perhaps, in neighbourhoods and

communities where narrowly constructed definitions of what it means to be accepted and/or successful work against the possibility of solidarity and social action.

### **Rupturing the hypothetical seal**

Anne Dyson (2003) writes of young children's official and unofficial worlds as those that are performed inside the classroom setting but categorised by whether or not the 'worlds' align with activities sanctioned by the teacher. For example, she highlights how a small group of children who would be considered working class or poor talk about and dramatised popular culture events and icons much like the Pokemon incident in the classroom described in Evans' book. However, instead of marking the unofficial and official as separate spheres, Dyson theorises how they are inextricably linked as she traces popular culture influences throughout official literacy work of children. As the primary-aged students in Dyson's study talked, wrote and drew, they used varied discourse genres (football commentating, hip-hop music lyrics, etc.) that demonstrated their linguistic flexibility and insights about the power of language. Some discourse genres were used in the students' writing while others circulated primarily as social mediators of power and group membership. Either way, the children found themselves in a classroom where it was not assumed necessary to draw fictional boundaries between one's self as a learner in the world and one's self as a learner in school.

Unlike the expectations held for the children at Tenter Ground, Evans does not attempt to seal off her self from the work of ethnography—certainly an academic and intellectual pursuit from most perspectives. Instead, she engages her self deeply as a way to make transparent that to which she had access throughout the meaning-making process. Evans describes her downward mobility from a posh existence to raise a family on a council estate and the struggles she experienced as she tried to understand the mothers in the study while being loyal to her own values as a parent. Although some of these dialogic exchanges in the text made me a bit uneasy as a reader concerned about the ease with which working-class people can be patronised and infantilised, they were nevertheless important to the text *because* they were integral to Evans' analyses. And yet, with the constant back-and-forth work of reflexivity in the book that reconstructs Evans' 'personal' experiences and their influence on her academic work, she fails to recognise (or at least articulate) the irony in Tenter Ground Primary School where the personal must be sealed off from formal learning.

A missed opportunity perhaps for Evans, but a generative rupture for the rest of us as we study, analyse, theorise and create new practices that respect children from a holistic perspective and imagine new, powerful and liberatory possibilities for education that is in the best interest of working-class children and families.

### **Learning from ruptures**

Evans' ethnography of Bermondsey, and her reflexivity throughout, does not live up to the lofty expectations the book's title implies given the missing research on pedagogy and teacher–student relations in the school. However, her contribution to

critical reflexivity and what it means to conduct research across class lines might be invaluable. Evans constructs herself as both trying desperately to overcome the limitations her poshness creates while simultaneously reading data through the lens of such limitations. And although she explores her emotions and tension-filled experiences throughout the process, analyses of the data from and about participants ends with a social lens, shaving off the emotional and psychological implications of living class-specific lives.

Instead of stopping with analyses of herself as a woman trying to become common, I wish that Evans would have considered her positioning as a *mother* within this research and how that location may complicate relations when studying children. Specifically, in my work I explore the psychosocial complexities of my own location as a White middle-class woman who is 'studying' or constructing intimate relations with working-class and poor children. The complications of such relations can be particularly intense when working-class or poor mothers perceive the researcher as representative of a hypothetical, idealised mother figure (Jones, 2006, 2007). Evans might have been walking a thin line between dangerous outsider and privileged insider as a woman who was perceived as 'posh' by the women in Bermondsey and also represented in the text as gaining the adoration of children. Exploring potential tensions within such a peculiar location would be important given the historical and contemporary surveillance of working-class mothers by middle-class women.

And although Evans' insightful analyses of the boys' forms of participation in football and Pokemon can contribute to the literature on out-of-school and multimodal literacies, I hope that readers know she is not writing from an informed perspective regarding education, pedagogy or complex analyses of social class. On the first page of her Notes (p. 176), she writes:

I am fascinated by the social processes through which people come to be differentially valued and, *purposefully naïve about the literature on social class and education*, I set out to see what kinds of new insights, if any, might arise from a contemporary ethnographic study of educational failure. (Emphasis added)

Evans' decision to not read literature in social class and education is unfortunate as she reproduces arguments made decades ago, and misses opportunities to connect valuable understandings about the boys' participation to contemporary theories around education, class and schooling. Additionally, the cultural difference model (what Evans calls a social variation model) has been extended in critical ways by numerous scholars working to transform educational theory and pedagogy to be more relevant to working-class and poor children.

Evans eloquently describes numerous examples of boys' explorations with cultural practices and social issues including their playing of football, broad and specific knowledge around local and regional football teams and games and Pokemon stickers and cards, and their negative perceptions of immigration. Each of these areas of interest were analysed through a lens of participation, but stopped short of pushing readers to reconsider the kinds of topics and themes that are used for formal learning in schools. Instead, Evans seems content with exploring the market-nature of social rela-



tions in the neighbourhood without attending to the irony that children demonstrate highly sophisticated literacy and language practices outside school and remain ‘... sulky, reticent, and reluctant to be in the classroom where application to school work is expected’ (p. 119).

Working to better understand social class, children, educational failure and powerful pedagogy requires explicit and rigorous interdisciplinary efforts. Gillian Evans offers insight to children’s exchange relations through popular culture as well as some challenges of conducting research across social class divides. I urge readers and future scholars to use these insights to study, theorise and construct readings of class-specific experiences of school and to work across disciplines to imagine class-sensitive pedagogies and classroom spaces. Helping working-class and poor children to recognise and interrogate the way they are expected to seal themselves off from academic pursuits could position them to rupture such seals in powerful, productive ways under the guidance of educators working for social justice.

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My own identity within the field of professional educational psychology was highly relevant to my interest in reviewing this book. The central questions addressed indirectly through Dr Evans’ ethnographic case study:

- why are working class children more likely to fail at school, and
- how exactly are they being failed,

are central to my own professional practice within schools and other community settings, and to my role in training the educational psychologists of the future.

It was in this latter context that I turned to this text, hoping for new insights to inform work with trainee educational psychologists within the university and in their supervised professional practice placements in local authority children's services that would enable them more effectively to meet some of the required learning outcomes of their professional training, such as developing the 'skills, knowledge and values to:

- develop an understanding of the influence of school ethos and culture, educational curricula, communications systems, management and leadership styles;
- develop interventions with schools;
- develop effective psychological interventions to raise educational standards generally and specifically for gender, minority status and low socio-economic status groups, promoting inclusion and reducing social exclusion, supporting behaviour policy development and managing organisational change; and
- develop appropriate psychological assessments and interventions based on an appraisal of the influence of the ecology of the learning environment on the experiences of thinking, learning and behaving in a range of educational and other settings for both individuals and groups ... (British Psychological Society, 2006, p. 3)

I enjoyed engaging with the lives and culture of the diverse, vibrant and vividly drawn cast of 'Bermondsey bods' who populated this book, whose beliefs, triumphs, rules, sorrows, human dramas and, in some cases, violent tragedies and untimely ends were narrated with sympathetic intimacy by 'Gill' in her insider/outsider role; however, from my own perspective, I failed fully to abstract the insights and understanding I had sought.

The elements I found disappointing are likely to reflect my own theoretical, research and professional standpoints in large part. Although as a psychology undergraduate I had studied anthropology as a subsidiary subject in my first year at university more than three decades ago, I have read very little within this discipline since engaging with Margaret Mead all those years ago! I think one of my difficulties as a reader was simply with the genre! While within psychology there is now far greater tolerance of a range of epistemological and research paradigms than was the case during that distant first-degree programme with its emphasis on positivism and controlled empirical study, and while as applied psychologists we draw extensively upon social interactionism, systems models and ecological perspectives, I found the role and identity of 'Gill' as researcher/narrator, and her particular use of the interpretive paradigm, difficult.

Within the first chapter and the extensive annotated notes that follow on from the 10 chapters that comprise the main body of the text, the author presents herself in the role of scholar. The Introduction: Social Class and Education, appropriately uses first-person voice, and includes interesting illustrative vignettes to draw in the reader and demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the phenomena described. Here, Gill offers a brief overview of some of the key strands within the available theoretical and research literature, demonstrating the complex, recursive interplay between the ontogenetic features of individual children and young people, the family, peer group,



school and other systems within which they live their lives, and the direct and indirect impact of media and public policy within and between these layers of the ecology. Inevitably, the account given is incomplete, with relatively limited attention afforded to the phenomenon of class cf. socio-economic status, the resilient exceptions who thrive and achieve good educational outcomes despite the existence of multiple risk factors, including low socio-economic status or 'class' in their lives, or to what has been learned about how we can best mediate the transgenerational patterns of low educational attainment and all that goes with them, from the many significant longitudinal compensatory social and educational programmes implemented over the past 40 years. However, this is to quibble: I thought the Introduction chapter did its job well, and so turned with still eager anticipation to the next section of the book.

The main body of the text is made up of three sections, each comprising three thematically linked chapters. Here, Gill is more clearly positioned as the social anthropologist who is living within the community that is the focus of her research, working as a teacher in a local primary school, providing additional tuition to some of the children from the school, and mixing both professionally and socially with their parents. However, in other, important ways, she is not a full member of the Bermondsey working-class community, in part because she is educated, middle-class and 'posh' (not 'common'), because her partner is a Black musician, and because her two children are privately educated and also, more importantly, because she is a researcher, juxtaposing everyday social interactions with her neighbours against a different role relationship, in which these friends and associates are the objects of field notes and requests to undertake research interviews over a period of 18 months.

The interface between personal identity and researcher was not wholly satisfactorily managed, from my own perspective. The overall research methodology and explanation of ethical requirements and how these were addressed were, for example, not fully presented. As a reader I was left to wonder, for example, what opportunities had existed for informed dissent from the cast of characters, in cases where they may not have welcome the research spotlight upon them. Even allowing for the considerable license afforded within interpretive, subjectivist paradigms, it was my own view that Gill often reports her own hypotheses or interpretations of the inner world of her protagonists with great confidence and certainty, giving no attention to other interpretations that might be considered—as illustrated by assertions such as:

[re: Sharon's daughter, Emma, in chapter three] ... wanting to take time off school because she worries when Sharon is ill. These problems have greater priority for Emma than the kinds of difficulties she faces with learning what it means to get along with her peers and do well at school, and she contrives, as far as possible, to stay at home as often as she can (p.48); or

[re: teachers' attitudes toward the non-compliant behaviour of a group of boys in chapter seven] ... It is impossible for teachers to conceive of the idea that normal human children could behave like this (p.111); or

[re: the social dynamics within the boys' group in chapter eight] ... in trying to impress Gary ... [or] ... Gary ... perceives to be either a threat to his dominance or weaker and more childish than he is. (p.122)

I wondered, therefore, whether opportunities had existed for iterative interpretation of the data collected, or whether it was simply assumed that the researcher's version of the 'truth' was the most valid.

Having fairly recently read, and greatly enjoyed, an account of a broadly similar, albeit smaller scale, ethnographic study by Shereen Benjamin (2002)—which explored the identities available to young working-class women positioned as having special educational needs within their London comprehensive school—I had much preferred the ways in which Benjamin structured her account to explore the complexities of her own identity within the research process and reconcile her position as both subject and object of her research, teacher and researcher. Benjamin's book (the focus of which resonates strongly with the questions that Gill Evans suggests three of her Bermondsey girls are asking: '... what kind of woman is it possible to become here in this council flat, in this block, in this estate, in this neighbourhood, in this school and in this place called Bermondsey—who can we be?') rendered far more explicit the research design and methodology, and, I thought, greater care was taken to differentiate between observation and interpretation. Overall, perhaps it is true to say that Benjamin's book was more clearly formulated as a research text, with theoretical, research and policy literature relatively extensively used to inform analysis and interpretation of the data collected and the conclusions drawn. In contrast, perhaps in pursuit of a more accessible read, Gillian Evans allows the narrative to flow, with only occasional interpretations or conclusions relevant to her research questions presented within the text, supported by a number of scholarly 'asides' presented within the annotate notes included after the final chapter.

From my own perspective, these features of writing style and the organisation of the structure of Evans' book detracted from the extent to which I considered that the insightful accounts of the author's observations and reflections were used to develop a coherent response to her two main research questions (p. 13), or to her third subsidiary question 'What is distinctive about the social situation of the working classes in Britain?' (pp. 13–14)—a question surely difficult to answer without reference to international comparisons.

I was a little unsure of who the intended readership of this book would be, and assumed that the author's need to offer explanations of terms such as 'on the straight and narrow', 'on the up', 'grassed' 'take the rap' or 'do his time' suggested an assumption that readers would be far removed from popular culture.

Would I commend this book to my students? I think that, despite my own reservations and mild sense of disappointment, the rich account of the complexities of life and the respect, compassion and tenderness with which all the characters are presented makes this a powerful and rewarding read, perhaps particularly to students not yet familiar with social milieus that differ from the relatively privileged backgrounds from which the majority of university students continue, despite the efforts of governments, to be drawn. Additionally, for both psychologists and teachers, there are many phenomena not specific to Bermondsey that we will recognise: for my part, I particularly enjoyed the illustrations of the fundamental attribution error of Christine, the teacher, who, 'like other education professionals', assumes that the

children's failures in school reflect 'an emotional deficit at home'; or David, the psychotherapist, who asserts that 'the problem in this school is that the children don't get good enough parenting' (p.94)—assumptions that remind us of how little education professionals have perhaps learned since the days when Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes (1984), following their observations of 'Young children learning: talking and thinking at home and school', were able confidently to refute the prevailing views of the time promulgated by Basil Bernstein (1971) and others that the educational failure of 'working-class' children reflected poor parenting. The Bermondsey teachers' assertions seem to suggest, however, that working-class parents are now deficient in emotional support rather than in their abilities to support the developing child's language and cognitive skills: assertions palpably not supported by Evans' own observations.

Finally, of course, while the content of the first six sections, concerned predominantly with family life and school, may offer relatively few new insights to professionals such as myself, who are familiar with much of the research into underachievement and who work daily and over extended periods of time with children, young people and families within schools, their homes and other community settings, we very rarely live in the 'manors' in which we work. Hence the last three chapters of the book are, sadly, particularly topical and did, for me, afford new insights, transcending questions of educational failure, and illuminating the socialisation of 'working-class' and other young men who do not do well in school, and the values and social dynamics that can so readily precipitate territorial disputes—where the struggle for an acceptable identity and related tribal loyalties and hostilities can rapidly lead to appalling acts of violence in response to minor infractions of unwritten rules, as in the case of John, who is beaten 'to within inches of his life' (p. 155) by a local gang that includes the father of one of the young men. Here, notions of individual psychopathology find no support: the examples presented demonstrate all too clearly the profoundly complex interactions between anti-social behaviour, drug misuse, parent-child relationships, peer group roles and rules, and the struggle for survival and the maintenance of self-esteem and retention of an acceptable social position, in contributing to the violent gang culture that presents so significant a concern within 'estates' such as Bermondsey and immediate neighbours such as Peckham, from the perspectives of the local residents themselves and all of us within the wider society.

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This is a book I feel I ought to like. It promises a refreshing renewal of a classic theme in the sociology of education. It promises a fresh approach to the ethnographic tradition. In the end, however, I find what it delivers leaves me with more questions than answers—and these questions are more about the nature of the research than the matter in hand. Perhaps it is enough that the book should generate renewed interest in the question of how we can research the relations between class, culture, locality and identity: but I wanted the book to give more in the way of substance and, in the final analysis, I am not sure about the nature of this book and what it does offer.

The book is hard to place in terms of genre: a feature that might signal an interesting exercise in academic boundary crossing. But the book's uncertain identity and deportment arises for me more as a damaging imprecision about purpose than as an interesting and productive ambiguity. The genre question here is significant and touches on the essence of the research modality. Beginning 'While I was shopping in a supermarket on the Old Kent Road ...' (almost reminiscent of Michael Young's Ph.D. thesis, which begins 'The fog became thicker as I crossed the canal from Bow ...'), this book presents itself very much in the first person, as an intimate account of an excursion in anthropology that is also a lived experience. Much effort in the writing is given to novelistic details, attempting to render the texture of events, places, relations. Much of the book is also about the author's personal but also professional reflections on her encounters in Bermondsey among people who are very different from herself and within institutions where she is fundamentally an outsider. The author informs us that she has lived in Bermondsey on a White working-class estate for some time, although her background, academic status and socio-cultural orientations clearly place her elsewhere. Her values are securely middle class, in fact, and she is at pains to inform us that living on an estate in Bermondsey is part of a personal economic management choice made to enable her daughters to attend private school. While the book makes much of its location in Bermondsey—emphasising the significance of territory, its particularity and its relation to identity—the author is at pains to inform us about her own different identity, values and social location. When the author describes the strangeness of one of her subject's home, she claims it 'may as well have been in Outer Mongolia' (p. 32). Equally troubling, when the author describes her perceptions of a school context she has researched, she writes: 'It's a bit like *Lord of the Flies* ...' (p. 116).

The style is comfortable, mostly descriptive, only sporadically including theoretical ruminations about the order of things as revealed by the often vividly realised context. The novelistic ethnography is occasionally punctuated with academic reference.

Although the book presents a bibliography that includes some of its illustrious predecessors, the argument makes little or no reference to them nor to the positions they have established. The theoretico-political issues the book's arguments give rise to are asserted rather than explored through painstaking scholarship—at times presented as if they arise directly and necessarily from the author's observations. This again is a function of the book's style, its relatively comfortable accessibility, but also its uncertainty of identity. The book does not attempt to present a carefully staged thesis—a progressive argument about the relations between socio-economic class identity and the education system, its practices and its institutions and its social effects. Its sociology is very much hands-on, offering as it does detailed eye-witness accounts, preferring highly loaded descriptions of people, places, social practices, ambiances, orders and relations. When it makes some fairly key points about the failure of schools to engage in the learning potential of their working-class charges, these do not address larger questions of curriculum politics, for instance; nor does it take into account the genealogy of schooling as a deep-seated governmental social technology; and nor does it consider the fundamental nature of the institution and its relations to the social structure. These absences prove significant.

In its central section, the book appears to be asserting that it is the presence within the school of hyperactive boys that makes it dysfunctional in terms of offering equality of opportunity in access to effective cultural capital for White working-class children. In addition, the ingrained attitudes of staff and some resourcing issues are thrown in as explanations for the evident failure of the school to realise the potential of its charges. This analysis is predicated, by implication—and erroneously, surely—on the idea that proper resourcing, better attitudes and more effective disciplining would turn around the social injustice of schooling's cultural biases. It is frequently evident that the book accepts the distinction between succeeding and failing schools (see p. 13) as *the* significant, determining factor in the educational failure of working-class children. This implicit acceptance limits the analysis and radically limits the force of the critique of education policy. In the end, in spite of the book's title, it is abundantly evident that the author is *not* an educationist; a fact that becomes obvious in a host of assumptions about schools and schooling and, alas, in a number of errors that appear in relation to knowledge about education. In the end, it is not clear how the thesis of this book differs from the—highly questionable—politics of the school improvement movement.

How much does the researcher's more or less constant presence contribute to—or detract from—the book's authority? Central to the book's *modus operandi* is the *confessional* mode of the narration. We are invited to share in the author's often surprised recognition that the behaviours of working-class folk—strange and dislocated as they are to the middle-class eye—actually make sense in terms of their own value systems. And guess what? Those value systems are often vastly different from the value systems proposed by schools and held by academic researchers. As the book unfolds, we are frequently offered insights into the changing perspective of the author as she expresses her surprised recognition that these people actually make active sense of their lives and create ways of being, behaving and interacting that—in all their difference from

the espoused values of the author—have a kind of fascinating logic to them. It is not her world ('Outer Mongolia'); and her fascination is at least equally blended with repugnance (especially for the rough schools that she cannot imagine her daughter attending, dominated as they are with a '*Lord of the Flies*' masculinity). There is something almost quaint in this double reaction.

As the author progressively understands her subjects, she even begins to identify with them in her linguistic behaviour, amused to find herself slipping into vernacular habits—although there are limits to this: clearly, she never resorts to slapping her daughter and never considers withdrawing her from the private school she attends to affiliate with the 'common-as-muck' folk she is coming to admire for their tenacity and the hard-won dignity of their alternative (folk) culture. Again, the frisson of exotic difference is never far away from the horror of unconscionable Otherness.

Frequent resort to a kind of confessional localisation amounts to an own-up to 'my own experience', predicated on a self-avowedly positioned and involved point of view. This is one form of authenticity that the book claims. On the other hand, this positioning is qualified by frequent reference to the fact that the author is a researcher—and as such is identified as other by her subjects—and takes an outsider's view of the behaviours she is witness to. Equally tellingly, the authorial 'I' makes deliberate, albeit highly selective, reference to anthropological, sociological and historical knowledge.

Genre issues therefore also touch on methodological questions concerning the gathering of data, the nature of the analysis and the modality of its representation. Obviously, methodological issues quickly slip into ontological queries—about the provenance of much of the assumption base that informs this book; about the status being claimed by the author for insider identity ('I live on a working-class estate in Bermondsey', 'some working-class women have befriended me', 'I have attended bawdy lingerie parties', etc.) and for outsider status ('my values are unashamedly middle class', 'I understand the history of education and its present condition', 'I have recourse to the perspectives on cultural life offered by anthropology').

At the same time, while the book informs us in a fairly easy style not readily identified with any specific sociological or anthropological position, it occasionally resorts to a more formal and vertical style of statement. Comments intrude, for example, about family structure and family dynamic, and are made with all the air of the authoritative anthropological outsider: 'she is the matriarch that her mother was but in a different way' (p. 40). Pokemon exchange rituals—offered as metonymic of a specific cultural order among 'local' (i.e. Bermondsey) children—are extensively covered ('a craze like no other', p. 149) and are seriously likened with Kula ring practices in Papua New Guinea, drawing on Malinowski (p. 194). What the book never does, however, and this may be an effect of a deliberately cultivated generic looseness, is to explicitly state its relations with its illustrious antecedents.

My phenomenological unease becomes more than sceptical when the book offers authoritative statements about the nature and history of education, however. At times, these are questionable; at others, they are plain wrong. A crucial give-away occurs early on the book when the book informs us (is this a reminder? Are we being



lessoned here in a basic sociology of education? Is it being assumed that we will have/will not have missed the classic texts of the sociology of education?):

Education requires of children a particular form of participation involving explicit and formalised task-oriented instruction in a highly specific and institutionalised social environment, which is usually a school. The school, understood as a distinctive social situation, is likely to be, in many ways, a very different learning environment to the one the child is used to at home. To understand the problem of the relatively low average educational attainment of working class children, it makes sense, then, firstly to investigate and describe the precise form of participation that education requires of children, and secondly to compare and contrast school-based learning with the specific forms of participation that are required of working-class children outside school. (p. 7)

How much is this a translation of Bernstein? Bourdieu? Willis? The point here is not to demand a book that is more obsessed with name-dropping, but to get some sense of the status of such statements in respect to the more narrative kind of data. In response to the quotation above, I am inclined to cry out: 'Yes: of course: but we've known all this for years, haven't we? What are you adding to the analysis?' Or should I simply accept the occasional intrusion of such sociological truisms as are offered because here we have a very specific kind of insight allegedly being offered into the detailed lived experience of working-class Bermondsey life?

Occasionally this book appears to want to go beyond analysis and make proposals for a politics of education. The analysis of the failure of schools to provide an effective environment for learning for working-class children is at times linked to the failure of the school to manage the disruptive behaviour of restless working-class boys who are used to more stringent forms of discipline, and at other times to the failure of inspection systems and their collusion with the school themselves. The problem is finally determined as the inevitable failure of schools to balance behaviour management with the imposition of a 'carefully prescribed curriculum'. The almost nightmare scenario of disruption to primary school functioning that the book presents is explicitly linked with a literary rather than a sociological model: 'It's a bit like *Lord of the Flies*, only without the desert island, and plenty of adults are looking on in vain as, everywhere, danger looms.' Clearly, as the author confesses (again): this is not at all the kind of school she would want her daughters to attend:

I cannot imagine my daughters having to attend a school like this one and I can only imagine how different the learning environment is in the classrooms of my daughter's new private school. (p. 95)

The school is described as a 'battle ground' (p. 83), although it is made clear that there are teachers who can manage children's behaviour and who can command attention. It just seems as though the school is not equipped to support and sustain the kinds of positive achievements these teachers may manage. Some of the school's attitudes seem misplaced, assuming that disruptive children necessarily come from disrupted homes, making damaging and eugenicist assumptions about the intelligence of pupils who do not play the attentive learning game or about ingrained generational socio-cultural failure. Often, when conducting these descriptions and analyses, the book seems to be on the verge of some kind of breakthrough. Always,

there is the hint that, if only schools and their curricula were managed differently, structured differently, staffed differently, inspected differently, resourced differently, they could be productive learning environments for working-class children. In terms of a sociology of education, however, this realisation never gets crystallised. The relations between the school and the social structure, as a consequence, are not explored. So it is that the book hovers between being a description of the conditions that ensure working-class failure and a book that wants to construct a polemic—still tied to the contemporary, mainstream logic of school improvement—that believes schools *might* be engines for the proper redistribution of cultural capital. Drawing on the pedagogical theory of Lave and Wenger, ‘learning as participation’ (p. 6) is identified as the necessary antidote to the ‘battleground’ scenario. The conditions under which such a transformation might occur seem to be—in the book’s mode of presentation, with its often implicit critique of how things are—at least imaginable, if far from realisable. Surely this thesis is only possible in relation to the very kind of localised, immersed ethnography that the book only occasionally complements with accounts of what schools are and how their frequently disturbing ways of working—and not working—can be understood (historically, genealogically, sociologically).

Just at the point when education issues are being foregrounded (part two), however, the book refocuses on individual cases, returning to where it feels most comfortable—writing anthropological vignettes that are designed to illuminate quintessential features of working-class culture, in order to proffer insight into the life-world. The description of the workings of the school in practice is deflected by a focus on cultural practices of the children engaging in *Pokemon*—and what it reveals about the life-world—then moving onto wider considerations of the general culture in terms of place and prestige. Here the book seems to thrive, relating incidents, explaining the cultural habits of the ethnos as children and teenagers engage in ritual pastimes, conflicts, games and negotiate identities for themselves. The final chapter, tellingly entitled ‘Notes from an Armed Robber—Gone Straight’, is dangerously close to falling for a certain gangster myth that threatens to undermine any credibility the research into White working-class maleness that the research may have, especially in a context where White working-class maleness is being both essentialised and pathologised: ‘What friendship there is between the boys at school has, as its background, a tension born of the high adrenalin, antagonistic and potentially intimidating physical exchange’ (p. 115). All of this is done with a sharp focus on individual cases, all told with keen eye of the anthropologist, ready to offer generalised diagnoses of the practices described. Borrowing from Lave and Wenger, the book claims that the aim of this section is to illustrate how the activities of various childhood and youth working-class peer groups may indicate modes of participative learning that belie the established position of schooling that working-class subcultures are actually hostile to learning itself. The anthropological commentary, however, often indicates a much more complex attitude that hovers between fascination and aversion for a self-avowedly alien (to the author, that is) culture, set of values and modes of conduct. It is essential to the book’s mode of working that the focus on educational questions reduces as the focus concentrates on specific aspects

of cultural milieu. (Masculinity—or is it White working-class masculinity?—is a main focus here.) A series of vignettes that are presented as a description of culture and identity are not in any closely argued way related to the educational failure that is foregrounded in the book's title.

The mode of relation in latter section of the book gives rise to some irksome forms of expression. Am I wrong to feel patronised when I am informed solemnly in footnotes that 'Fat Boy Slim is a popular music DJ (disc jockey)' or that 'The Kray twins—Ronnie and Reggie—were infamous gangsters who built up a criminal empire from the East End of London' (p. 191) or when being informed that compulsory free state education is the 'outcome' [*sic*] of the Butler Education Act (p. 176). In the face of this double irritation, I am not sure whether to claim myself as a proper working-class Londoner, dragged up in deepest, darkest Kilburn, or to identify myself as a proper middle-class historian of education with due academic credentials and quite a bit of foreknowledge. Either way, the effect is to wonder how much of this decoding of general cultural knowledge is symptomatic of the book's own cultural naivety. (Consider this, from a footnote: 'Football has traditionally been a working class men's game whilst cricket, tennis and rugby are considered to be middle class and public school boys' sports'.) At times, this apparent naivety afflicts some of the book's presentation of knowledge about education. When I am treated to a brief disquisition on the characteristic workings of the playground I do wonder why the book has not done a bit more research into what are quite striking and well-informed, carefully and extensively researched accounts of playground histories, for example. Again, a generic question arises: is the book trying to pass itself off as some kind of common-sense, off the top of the head anthropology? Or is it genuinely under-informed? This feeling of uncertainty about the credentials of the book and its claim to authority is unfortunately compounded by a number of errors. The Butler Education Act is not of course the point of origin of the provision of state-funded education, just as—and here the error is remarkable—there were no ragged schools as such in the 1920s, although the book throws in this reference with perfect confidence. What is more, occasional linguistic (and/or conceptual?) gaffes compound the question about the book's authority. I do not think it is unduly fastidious, for example, to question the deployment of the term underclass here, for example: is it?

it is impossible to understand what it means for a young man to become working class, without simultaneously appreciating the lure of the so-called underclass. Even a man who makes an honest wage will rarely turn his back on the ready supply of stolen goods.  
(p. 163)

In Pamela Horn's (1989) *The Victorian and Edwardian Schoolchild* there is a beautiful photograph, dated 1896, of a large and potentially wayward group of raggedy White working-class boys being held in order for the occasion. The location is Bermondsey. The photograph, it seems to me, invites several kinds of knowledge to reveal its meanings for those who would seek to understand the relations between education and working-class White children. We can propose, for instance, that some understanding of the emergence of the school as a key social technology in the late nineteenth

century, some understanding of pedagogical–social relations embedded in such institutions, and their histories, would be relevant; that perspectives from social history would be helpful; that some carefully researched and meticulously informed phenomenology of the school would come into play, including analyses of the cultural dynamics of the curriculum and the pedagogic order. Surely any ethnography that would claim to offer new understandings of these things would need to supplement its anthropological observations as well as its personalised insights and perceptions with such knowledge? And, surely, it would need to do so in a more rigorous way than this book, so full of promise, manages to achieve.

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### **Reference**

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