The complexity of educational elitism: moving beyond misrecognition

Article (Accepted Version)

Telling, Kathryn (2020) The complexity of educational elitism: moving beyond misrecognition. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 41 (7). pp. 927-941. ISSN 0142-5692

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/92548/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

The complexity of educational elitism: moving beyond misrecognition

Critical, and in particular Bourdieusian, sociology of education is often suspicious about educators when they describe their ideal students. It tends to see these descriptions as euphemisations, so that apparently intellectual assessments are really elitist evaluations about students' class positions. However, this way of thinking about educators can lead to reductive accounts in which actors are completely blind to the real meaning of their beliefs, which must be unveiled by sociologists. In this article I utilise Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology to offer an alternative model of educators' accounts, in which there is no real meaning to be unveiled, but rather a complex mix of meanings held in educators' minds at once. Analysing interview data with those teaching on new liberal arts degrees in English universities, I demonstrate what can be gained by staying with the complexity of participants' own accounts, rather than mining them for one fundamental truth.

Keywords: elitism; Luc Boltanski; pragmatic sociology; Pierre Bourdieu; misrecognition; liberal arts

Word count: 7,999

Introduction

The pragmatic sociology of Luc Boltanski has received increasing amounts of attention in recent years (see Susen and Turner 2014 and the special issues of the *European Journal of Social Theory* in 2011 and *Thesis Eleven* in 2014). These ideas have been little explored in the critical sociology of education. However, the perspective which the tools of pragmatic sociology can provide may offer a fresh way of thinking about some of the sub-field's ongoing

tangles, in particular those that follow from Pierre Bourdieu-inspired work. A primary concern in such debates is the extent to which actors (educationalists, parents, policy-makers and students themselves) are aware that one of the functions of the education system is the *reproduction of social inequality*. As this article demonstrates, Bourdieusian sociology of education struggles with the problem of social reductionism here: are all expressions of judgement from educators merely euphemised expressions of positions in the field of power, whereby judgements of written style or classroom behaviour are ‘really’ judgements of students’ class positions? If judgements in the educational field are ‘really’ judgements conditioned by power, can educators be aware of this reality? Or are they, instead, mere dupes of this system? I contend that rather than arguing in circles about what Bourdieu ‘really’ meant on this issue, we can draw from a different set of theoretical constructs altogether (Bouzanis and Kemp 2019).

With this aim in mind, the article analyses qualitative interview data in which university lecturers discuss who they think their degrees are ‘for’.¹ The data comes from a project investigating the emergence and growth of US-style interdisciplinary liberal arts degrees in English universities. Amongst other things, the project seeks to understand the increasing popularity of these degrees in the context of expanding university participation, where hierarchies of prestige clearly remain (Croxford and Raffe 2015; Leathwood and O’Connell 2003) and differentiation from competitors is an increasingly important institutional task. I explore how lecturers negotiate this landscape, and in particular a certain set of tensions. On the one hand, there is a strong desire to protect the non-vocational subjects (and the humanities in particular) when they appear to be under attack, and to advocate for their importance. Liberal arts degrees, which are claimed to be particularly adept at preparing students for the unknown world of future work, seem well-equipped to do this job. There is a tension, however, between this conception of the liberal arts degrees’ worth and a more purely intellectual idea that non-

vocational education must serve some higher purpose (see Brewer 2018), ‘for its own sake’ as we used to say. Both the utilitarian and the idealist ideas about these degrees’ value are in turn in tension with the potential for elitism that they contain: that is, the idea that developing niche degrees for a handful of students and teaching them in small classes reinforces the idea that the humanities and other non-vocational disciplines should be the preserve of a few.

Rather than arguing that the educators in this study *euphemise* their class-conditioned biases to terms appropriate to their educational work (a comment that is ‘really’ about middle-class deportment and style is expressed appropriately as one about intellectual confidence and openness), the article argues that different ideas about worth, or value, are being brought to bear on the educational situation. Educators are not unaware of the complex and even paradoxical nature of their utterances about students, and I argue that it is not helpful to think of *one* aspect of this complexity as its real meaning, to be unveiled by the sociologist. Instead, it is useful to *stay with* the complexity and strangeness of actors’ own understandings.

The article begins with a brief description of the study from which interview data will be analysed. It then offers an account of the problem of reductionism (the tendency to reduce social action to one fundamental cause, in this case a jostle for power) in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and of Bourdieusian sociologists’ attempts to deal with this. It goes on to introduce Luc Boltanski’s pragmatic sociology, and argues that this approach can resolve some of the binds of Bourdieusian sociology of education. In order to demonstrate the usefulness of Boltanski’s approach, the article then applies these ideas to interview data from the study, outlined below.

The study

The research from which the below data is drawn looks at the current growth of US-style, interdisciplinary liberal arts degrees in English higher education. There are seventeen English

institutions listing such degrees on the Universities and Colleges Admission Service pages for a 2020 start, although the number fluctuates year on year, not only as new courses are developed but as existing degrees are discontinued.

In the American context the liberal arts are not defined in opposition to the sciences. Rather, liberal arts (sometimes couched as liberal arts and sciences, or more broadly as liberal education) are conceptualised as the pure, non-applied or non-vocational disciplines, distinguished from applied, professional or vocational education. However, while some English liberal arts degrees incorporate the natural sciences, most are strongly based in the humanities, generally with the option to pursue the social sciences too. They offer a way for students to pursue a range of disciplinary interests but, in distinction to combined honours courses, encourage students to pursue the links between the disciplines, especially in bespoke core modules, which often take a thematic or problem-based approach. Such interdisciplinary education is increasingly presented as conducive to the kind of joined-up thinking required to solve complex world problems such as climate change (see for example Taylor 2009, and for critique see Barrett 2012).

The project as a whole seeks to understand the increasing popularity of such degrees in the context of broader changes in the higher education landscape, including massification, marketisation, and differentiation between higher education institutions. It explores how defences of the central role of non-vocational, and especially humanities, education can come to take elitist forms in some contexts, and how social and intellectual elitism become bedfellows with ideas about education for its own sake and the love of learning, and a utilitarian employability discourse. The project has involved discourse analysis of university websites as well as interviews with liberal arts students at a range of higher education institutions across England, both pre- and post-92.² The interviews with academics from which I draw in this paper, however, were conducted at three case study universities in different regions of England.

I interviewed nine academics from the three institutions, ranging from teaching fellows to deans of faculty.

Old University is a medium-sized civic university that received its royal charter in the early-twentieth century. It is located centrally in a large, prosperous city. Liberal arts here are housed in the Faculty of Arts, and at the time of interview every academic working on the degree was a classicist, although this has subsequently changed.

Post-War University is a smaller institution located on the periphery of a medium-sized, prosperous satellite town. It received its charter in the 1960s. All of those working on the degree identified in some sense with the broad designation of area studies, although disciplinary homes were varied.

The final institution, New University, is smaller again, and located on the outskirts of a small, post-industrial city. It is a former technical college which gained university title after the Further and Higher Education Act was passed in 1992. The lecturer who designed and largely delivered the degree was again located in area studies, although input has drawn from throughout the College of Arts, Humanities and Education.

Before going on to discuss relevant findings from interviews with academics at these three institutions, this article engages with some well-known problems for Bourdieu-inspired sociology of education, and in particular that of reductionism. It goes on to outline Boltanski's pragmatic sociology as a potentially fruitful way out of some of the binds of the Bourdieusian approach.

Bourdieu, euphemism and misrecognition

Is there, for Bourdieu, a fundamental truth at the heart of all social life – a struggle for power, or self-interest – to be *unveiled* by the sociologist? While it is simplistic to portray Bourdieu as reducing all of social life to *economic* struggle and positioning, nonetheless the model seems

to rely upon classed self-interest (whether conscious or not), as at the root of social action, as this section will try to demonstrate.

One way of advocating for the Bourdieusian model is to argue that the concept of *field* introduces complexity and uncertainty into social life. Such a dynamic understanding of field is present in for instance Loïc Wacquant's definition: a field is 'a battlefield, a structured arena within which agents, because they carry different potentials and have different positions and proclivities, struggle to (re)define the very structure and boundaries of the field' (Bourdieu with Wacquant 1989, 8). On this understanding, fields (the field of intellectual production, for example) do not merely require individuals to express their interest, or class position, in terms appropriate to that field. Rather, new entrants to the field bring new resources and new concerns, and the field is, as in Wacquant's definition, a constant site of struggle and change.

Those who defend Bourdieu's model often make this understanding of field central to the argument that it is not reductionist (see for example Atkinson 2019). There is a danger, however, in being so faithful to Bourdieu that we take at face value his stated commitment to the importance of field, rather than returning to the empirical work and investigating the role of field there. To take what Bourdieu says he is doing at face value is to ignore the importance he himself gave to empirical work in the process of theory-building (Burke, Emmerich, and Ingram 2013), as well as the injunctions he made to nurture critical, questioning and heterodox positions (Lahire [2001] 2011).

A crucial term used in the mobilisation of field in Bourdieu's own work is that of homology, or 'diversity within homogeneity' (Bourdieu 1990, 60). The term refers to the propensity for individuals to hold similar, or homologous, positions in multiple fields at once. Thus an academic's position in the political field may be homologous to their position in the philosophical field, as Bourdieu argued in his study of Martin Heidegger (Bourdieu [1988] 1991). The concept of homology is important if we are to account for the ways in which status

and power ‘stick’ to particular individuals across multiple fields (Bennett et al. 2009). If overused, however, homology can lead to an inert picture of social life, in which fields cease to be diverse sites of struggle but become instead nested within one another, rather like Russian dolls. The general ‘field of power’ (see for example Bourdieu [1989] 1996) becomes the overarching determinant of position within each sub-field; the only effect that field has in such a model is a process of ‘euphemisation’ (see for example Bourdieu [1984] 1988, 201; Bourdieu [1984] 1993, 90), whereby one’s position in the general field of power must be expressed in terms appropriate to the sub-field.³

Far from intentionally deceiving others, however, actors are in a complex relation to their actions in a field: they both do and do not understand the real reasons for their actions and beliefs. This is the idea of ‘misrecognition,’ which actors exhibit when simultaneously owning and denying the underlying reasons for their actions. It is captured well in Bourdieu’s discussion in *The Logic of Practice* of sacrificial rites, whose murderous character is at once recognised and denied:

a double game played with truth, through which the group, the source of all objectivity, in a sense lies to itself, by producing a truth whose sole function and meaning are to deny a truth known and recognized by all, a lie that would deceive no one, were not everyone determined to deceive himself. (Bourdieu [1980] 1990, 234)

As David James (2015) has argued, the strange semi-conscious character of misrecognition is not always understood in applications of the Bourdieusian model, especially when such work engages in a relatively light way with the ideas. We should note, however, that Bourdieu’s own explanations are not always clear on this point, as for instance when

discussing the class-bound assessments of students' work carried out by teachers in *Homo Academicus*:

They successfully perform what they (objectively) have to do only because they *believe* that they are doing something different from what they are actually doing; because they are actually doing something different from what they believe they are doing; and because they *believe* in what they *believe* they are doing. (Bourdieu [1984] 1988, 207; original emphases)

There are important differences between the formulation of misrecognition in *The Logic of Practice* and the one in *Homo Academicus*. In the first quotation, Bourdieu's depiction of misrecognition is akin to James's understanding. There is not an unequivocal separation between conscious and unconscious thoughts, but rather the existence of multiple competing and even contradictory understandings at once. (See also Thomson's [2014] understanding of misrecognition.) The actors carrying out sacrificial rites *both* have some understanding of their actions as murderous, *and* believe in the mystified meanings of the rite. Here we get a sense of the ambiguity of human thought and action, and how the existence of multiple fields makes it possible, or even common, that we carry multiple understandings of our actions at once.

By the time we get to *Homo Academicus*, actors are no longer ambiguously aware of the complex meanings of their actions: 'They successfully perform what they (objectively) have to do only because they *believe* that they are doing something different.' It is, then, for the critical sociologist to *unveil* the real meaning of social action, of which actors had hitherto been quite unaware. The real meaning ('what they are actually doing') is the reproduction of class inequality, giving legitimacy to such inequality by euphemising it to educationally appropriate terms. Teachers are in all earnestness when describing their working-class

students' work as 'flabby' and their middle-class students' work as 'cultured' (Bourdieu [1984] 1988, 196). It takes a sociologist to see the real meaning of such euphemisms. In their blindness to social reality, teachers 'are the primary victims – as well as the primary beneficiaries – of the legitimating illusion' (Bourdieu [1989] 1996, 5).

As a sociologist who researches educators, and as an educator who spends time with other educators, I find it hard to recognise this picture of real meanings and pretend meanings, of illusion and unveiling. It is an 'over-socialised' view (Wrong 1961) in which no room is left for ambiguity in the pedagogic process (Watkins 2018). As James, Thomson and others note, actors' beliefs, their understandings of their actions are more complex than this model suggests. Later in this article I analyse some interview data which exhibits just such complexity. Yet while those authors seek to rescue the true meaning of misrecognition to account for this, I argue that the appeal to a general field of power, and the concomitant ineffectualness of field as a construct to account for uncertainty and flux in social life – that is, the model's social reductionism – mean that Bourdieu's ideas themselves can hamstring us when we try to get to grips with the puzzling ways in which educators both acknowledge and disavow how their educational practices reproduce social inequalities. We may need a different theoretical model from the ones which have been routinely used in the critical sociology of education to account for this observed reality. In this spirit, I now turn to Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology.

Toward a pragmatic sociology of education

Luc Boltanski's pragmatic sociology, developed in collaboration with fellow sociologists including Laurent Thévenot and Eve Chiapello, emerged in dialogue with, and as a critique of, Bourdieu's model. Boltanski worked closely with Bourdieu at the Centre for European Sociology, for instance contributing to the book on photography (Bourdieu et al. [1965] 1990). While Will Atkinson (2019) has recently argued that Boltanski overstates his difference from

Bourdieu, and even that his work can easily be incorporated into the Bourdieusian model, here I contend, along with Boltanski himself, that pragmatic sociology differs significantly from Bourdieusian sociology (whilst sharing important concerns and precepts), and that it can more effectively account for the complex explanations that educators give for their conceptions of an ideal student, discussed below.

For Boltanski, modern societies are fundamentally characterised by dissent, dispute and challenge, *and* by attempts to resolve, or simply to bracket off, such disputes: ‘This is the sense in which our societies can be qualified as critical’ (Boltanski [1984] 2012, 192). The conflict and consensus traditions within sociology miss the extent to which both aspects of social life exist upon a continuum, acting as one another’s necessary social condition: conflict makes sense only as a disruption of consensus, while consensus can be understood only as the resolution of conflict.

In differentiated societies, different polities or worlds of value (with their own registers, grammars and types of evidence) have emerged to allow actors to understand and develop their sense of justice. One of the oldest such worlds is the domestic polity, in which value is connected to hierarchical social relations of duty and tradition, and to personal characteristics such as reputation, good manners and style. This economy of value (connected to a father-like sense of duty embodied in the king) was challenged by the emergence of the civic polity in modern times. With a competing sense of value, epitomised in Rousseau’s political philosophy and finding a culmination in the French revolution, the civic polity insists upon a clear separation between public and private. An appeal to the civic world is made when, for example, I lodge a complaint that two members of a council are related to one another. While personal relations of this sort are quite legitimate according to a domestic value system, the complaint gets its strength from an assertion that the correct value system to bring to bear on public appointments is the civic and not the domestic.

As this example demonstrates, it is not the case that one economy of worth comes to replace another, nor that actors move between discrete and clearly demarcated polities throughout their day. Actors live in multiple worlds at once. This conception of individuals living in multiple worlds is akin to Bernard Lahire's notion of the *plural actor*: each person is a highly complex individual created out of "not always compatible, not always cumulative, and sometimes highly contradictory" experiences in different spheres of life ([2001] 2011, 204). Like Boltanski, Lahire (2015) is sceptical about the capacity of Bourdieusian field theory to account for the complexity of the individual (although, as I have tried to show elsewhere [*self-citation*], Lahire's 'folded sociology' may lack the critical and expressly political potential of pragmatic sociology).

If I can justify my actions, or challenge those of others, by appealing to the values of a particular world, the *complexity* portrayed by this model means that I can also escalate a dispute by claiming that inappropriate values are being imported from another polity. For instance, I may quite legitimately use domestic values when choosing a romantic partner (links via family or friends, personal reputation and esteem, good character and style). Yet I may well find my actions disputed as illegitimate if it is suspected that I have brought such values to bear on a university admissions interview, since this is commonly understood as a *civic test*. Conversely the head teacher of a private school may argue that comportment, manners and character are quite legitimate values to be tested in this context, and that we act in a cold or even inhumane manner when we falsely exclude them from educational assessments.

In such educational disputes we see the difficulties actors encounter when trying to act in coherently just ways. The same progressive educator who is deeply troubled by the admissions interviewer's focus on domestic values may with equal conviction argue that schools should focus on the whole child, developing their personal and emotional as well as purely intellectual capabilities. This holistic approach is opposed to a mere 'teaching to the

test,’ and here the progressive educator is in agreement with the head teacher of the private school about the inhumane character of purely civic examination. While we could understand the progressive educator and the head teacher of the private school as in a kind of doxic agreement (that is, their thought here is predicated on a set of ideas so fundamental to thinking in the educational field that even those who hold the most heterodox beliefs cannot think outside them), this does not account for the strange mix of agreement and disagreement, and for the different degrees of salience these doxic ideas are believed to hold, by different actors in different situations.

By contrast, the notion of worlds of worth introduces a large amount of uncertainty, and *fragility* (Boltanski [2009] 2011), into the social order. If every actor has the ability to dispute the justness of their situation by appealing to shared principles and competing measures of justice, it is not right to characterise those actors as docile recipients of symbolic violence (if dominated) or as unthinking conduits of power (if dominant). When a child is excluded from school they do not tend to accept this as inevitable or indeed as just. Almost always a dispute of some sort will emerge, and the ideas about justice drawn upon by the two sides of the dispute will not be predictable.

The multiple courses of action available here mean that the potential dispute is a source of agency for actors, and we cannot predict how they will respond. Passive acceptance of a situation is certainly a possible response. But it is only one possibility amongst others. Indeed, while for Bourdieu complete immersion in social life, as a ‘feel for the game’ in the famous sporting analogy (see for example Bourdieu [1997] 2000), is most actors’ most common subjective state, in pragmatic sociology such immersion in a world can be considered problematic by actors, since it entails a lack of acknowledgement of social complexity. To return to my example above: while tests such as university admissions interviews are often criticised for bringing domestic considerations like personal style and ‘character’ into properly

civic tests (see for example Burke and McManus [2011] on admissions processes for art students), progressive educators remain concerned that we must educate ‘the whole person,’ and are particularly critical of ‘teaching to the test.’ To neglect entirely domestic considerations is a cold and almost robotic response to a complex social order. Competent social actors use levity to ward off the accusation of imprudence or inhumanity by pointing to their awareness of different social worlds: ‘Sorry about how I was in the meeting – I had my chair’s hat on.’

Critical sociology need not rise above the ordinary understandings of actors in order to unveil injustice, if such actors are already aware of injustice and in the business of unveiling it themselves. Far from being mere conduits for the reproduction of a social order of which they are largely unaware, actors here work pragmatically with a situation and develop complex, situationally specific concepts of justice in dialogue with others. In the following section, I try to demonstrate this by relating some of the complex ways in which liberal arts educators describe their ideal student.

Disputing the ideal student

It is possible for quite different polities of worth to be brought to bear when trying to make sense of the purpose of education and, in particular for the discussion below, when trying to develop an understanding of who such an education is ideally ‘for.’ In the context of liberal or non-vocational education, competing conceptions of the student will be at work. For instance, appeals may be made to an industrial polity in which the liberal arts student is particularly well-placed to take on the mantle of ‘the worker of tomorrow’ because of their disciplinary flexibility, superior communication skills, entrepreneurial spirit and so on. These soft skills constitute the nebulous qualities of graduate ‘talent’ as conceptualised by Phillip Brown and colleagues (Brown and Hesketh 2004; Brown, Lauder and, Ashton 2011), or what Tholen et al. (2016) refer to as ‘graduateness.’ (The promotional materials for liberal arts degrees *do*

often make an appeal to the industrial world, and these ideas were shared by my participants too. There is not space to explore this polity in depth here.) Or there again, it would be possible to think about the liberal arts in terms of a market for credentials and the need for current graduates to stand out from others, given the growing competition for graduate jobs (as in Randall Collins's [1979] notion of credentials as currency). Indeed, throughout the following discussion it may be argued that institutional market considerations, that is a desire for tuition fee revenue (particularly from international students), are central to the concerns of participants, yet continually disavowed. While in the analysis that follows I do not foreground the wish to appeal to students as income generators, I explore the importance of student recruitment for Post-War University, in particular, elsewhere (*self-citation*), and hope to push this point further in a book-length study of the data.

Notwithstanding the importance of such considerations, here I focus on three polities in particular. These are the domestic, which, as was discussed above, entails an appeal to esteemed personal qualities, framed sometimes in this context as 'culture'; the civic, again discussed above, largely understood here as performance in public examinations; and the inspirational, which again entails an appeal to personal qualities, where these are not connected to social measures of esteem but to intrinsic values such as integrity or intellect. The term 'learning for its own sake' captures well this inspirational mode.

The problem of elitism was mentioned, unprompted, by virtually every academic I interviewed. A sociologist was not required to introduce it. If you teach in a university, it is highly unlikely that the demographics of your students have never occurred to you, and some interviewees had thought about this problem in quite some depth. The Programme Director of Liberal Arts at Old University told me, with some discomfort, about the way in which the degree had initially been sold to senior management, and the veiled elitism which she detected beneath the rhetoric. She was particularly concerned with the institutional desire to attain more

students who had studied the international baccalaureate (IB), an interdisciplinary qualification equivalent to A levels which is sometimes associated with more academically successful schools, with some private schools, and with an international elite:

You know, these are going to be students who are sort of polymathic, who don't want to specialise, who a lot of will have come from the baccalaureate. It will attract a certain kind of, you know, able student that we want more of at Old. (Programme Director, Old)

She told me that, while successful in attracting institutional support initially, the more elitist connotations of this conceptualisation of the liberal arts student had now been dropped.

It is too simple, then, to say that the issue of elitism in the liberal arts was not acknowledged. Rather, it was often alluded to – and then managed in a specific way. By moving between the inspirational worth of liberal arts students – their love of learning, intellectual curiosity and the rest – and their domestic attributes, the distinction between intellectual and social elitism became muddled.

For example, the Programme Leader of Liberal Arts at Post-War University folded her awareness of the problem of social elitism into a discussion of the intellectual attributes of her students:

Very bright [uh-huh]. Very very bright. Most of them. Not all of them. But usually very promising students [mmm]. I guess it was well perhaps reflected as well in their sort of social origins of disproportionate representation of international students from private schools [mmm-hmm]; students who were predicted, you know, three, four As, A*s. (Programme Leader, Post-War)

The same academic a little later discussed how the introduction of liberal arts fed into a broader institutional drive to raise the admissions criteria for entry to the university:

Programme Leader: And entry tariff was quite high...

Interviewer: Again, does that drive come from the institution or from the people really working on the degree or...?

Programme Leader: Institution. But also I think it did work well. We do need students who are a bit sort of wiser academically. I think it does take students with, you know, with guts basically. And yes, and a higher, perhaps with a slightly higher academic standard.

These careful, even hesitant descriptions of an ideal student – ‘bright,’ ‘promising,’ ‘wiser,’ ‘with guts’ – sit alongside an acknowledgement of the problem of elitism. The problem of social elitism is not disavowed but is placed next to a more idealist discussion of the attributes of the ideal student. It is more like a slippage than a concealment.

This compromise between the inspirational and domestic worlds is akin to what Bruce Kimball (1986) calls, in his history of liberal education, the accommodated liberal-free ideal. While the liberal-free idea relates to a belief in non-vocational education and the free exercise of the mind for its own sake, in the early twentieth-century American university this notion was tempered by an idea that such an education was perhaps not suitable for all, as conceptualised in Swarthmore president Frank Aydelotte’s injunction to ‘learn to see the error in that superficial interpretation of democracy which assumes that all men are equal in intellectual ability’ (Aydelotte 1944, 13; cited in Kimball 1986, 190). In elite universities the

raising of admission requirements, as in the Liberal Arts Programme Leader's discussion above, was justified on the basis of an attempted distinction between social and intellectual elitism. Indeed, when slipping between social and intellectual elitism, or between the domestic and inspirational worlds, participants feed into an old and well-worn debate which has long animated discussion of the liberal arts in the US context.

When reflecting on his earlier study with colleagues into the beliefs of middle-class parents who opted out of 'league table thinking' and sent their children to their local comprehensive, David James (2015) notes the importance of 'brightness' to participants' thinking. Whilst critical of the simplistic, individualising, elitist, even neoliberal motivations of other middle-class parents, the individual specialness of these parents' own offspring was asserted – taken for granted, even. By criticising one aspect of educational injustice, the participants do not thereby disentangle themselves from the complex mesh of inequality in which the very notion of assessed education is inscribed. While James understands this under the Bourdieusian light of misrecognition, the pragmatic conception of politics of worth allows us to avoid saying that such participants both do and do not understand what they 'really' mean. In the Programme Leader's description of her ideal student and of the need to raise the tariff, above, she tried to come to terms with a complex social reality in which she was asked to do something which made her somewhat uncomfortable, *and yet she could understand and appreciate the concept of (inspirational) justice being put to work here.*

The preceding quotations are from the Programme Leader at Post-War University, an institution very conscious of its position in the middle of status hierarchies. Until recently largely known as a teaching institution, in the last fifteen years Post-War has experienced a significant upsurge in its research reputation, and has risen up the rankings with speed. Despite, or perhaps because of, Post-War's rapid rise in the rankings, it remains in an anxious place, characterised by continual attempts at status improvements. As mentioned previously, the

university administration has been keen to complement their move up the rankings with ever higher UCAS tariffs, and the new liberal arts degree was agreed to in part because it suited that agenda.

I quote at length now from the former Executive Dean of Arts and Human Sciences at Post-War, because his discussion exemplifies the appeal to multiple polities of worth in describing who the liberal arts are ‘for.’ The complexity of the account is conditioned by the specific context at Post-War in which the scramble for ‘better students’ as indicators of prestige is especially pronounced. In the following the former Dean explained some of the institutional motivations for instigating a liberal arts degree:

Because typically interdisciplinary-type students tend to be relatively high in their exam results, partly because a lot of them do IB, international baccalaureate, and are often people who are reasonably well-travelled, they’ve been to private schools – and Post-War wanted to actually bring in more private school students at the time, which was another argument [mmm] for having liberal arts students because we assumed, and it turned out reasonably correctly, that a largish number of them, of the applicants, would be likely to be independent schools [mmm]. [...] But I would say, of the people from the independent schools, quite a few of them were people who had lived abroad [mmm]. Who were, maybe the parents were in the army or maybe the diplomatic service or business people working abroad [yeah]. They already.... They’d been to another culture. It’s.... Well you’d expect this from me being bicultural, but it’s just being able to see beyond the cliffs of Dover, basically [yeah]. You know. Brexit! Don’t talk to me about Brexit [laughter]! I’m absolutely furious about Brexit. I mean I think it’s the worst possible thing that’s ever happened to the UK. And these guys are the perfect remainers, you know. [...] little Englandism is just so awful [mmm]. (Former Dean, Post-War)

There is quite a lot going on in this passage. Obviously there is, again, a slippage between the intellectual attributes of the ideal liberal arts student and their social background, much starker here than elsewhere because of the remarkably candid admission that the university's strategies for prestige accrual included the targeting of private school students. (I do not mean to deny that many universities, and in particular more elite ones than Post-War University, are very clearly targeting private school pupils through formal and informal links, school visits and the rest. I only mean to note the starkness of the admission itself.) More specifically, there is a slippage from the ideal student's intellectual ability (measured by their academic attainment, or civic worth), to their love of learning and intellectual openness (inspirational worth), and then to the international baccalaureate as an indicator for such openness (domestic worth). It is almost as if the students are here praised for their decision to take the IB, to attend an international or even a private school: this decision indicates their intellectual openness.

The critical sociology of education and of work is of course replete with qualitative data of this sort. The views of educators, employers, elite workers and graduates are justified in terms of some apparently legitimate set of values (often meritocratic), yet they have the effect of reproducing social elites. To think about such views in this way is to argue, with Bourdieu, that there is a real meaning (social reproduction) behind the illusory veneer of meritocracy. This real meaning, determined by positions in the general field of power, is hidden from the participant.

Using the theoretical construct of politics of worth, however, we no longer see the reproduction of the social order as the 'real' meaning of participants' views. A domestic concern with the 'well-bred' is not a dirty secret that the participant hides from themselves, as in misrecognition. Within one register it is entirely legitimate. The degree to which we *like*

students is the bread and butter of our staffroom conversations as educators: this way of talking only becomes illegitimate when called out as such in the beginnings of a dispute. In such a case we may justify ourselves by making an appeal to a different register, or we may continue to use the language of domestic justice. This freedom to choose a register, and the indeterminacy of the social situation, means that we are not in the realms of a hidden truth, and actors are not unaware of the different ideas which may be brought to bear on a situation.

In the context of liberal education, in particular, there is a long history of appeals to the domestic world. The virtues said to be imparted by such an education have historically included character, culture and *civility* (Rothblatt 1976): the idea of a natural ease brought about through the study of the best that has been thought and said, a smattering of knowledge across a range of domains. There is a good deal of complexity here: liberal education is ideally suited to gentlemen with the leisure time and temperament to pursue it, yet the very existence of liberal *education* suggests that civility can be *learnt*. As Boltanski and Thévenot ([1991] 2006, 167) write of the domestic values put forward in a business manual on civil conduct in the workplace, ‘The worthy act *naturally* because they are moved by *habits*’ (original emphases). Civility can even be given a democratic character, as in some progressive educationalists’ hopes of liberal education for all: this is encapsulated in Lawrence Cremin’s phrase ‘civility liberalized’ (Cremin 1970, 419; cited in Kimball 1986, 142).

The point of all this is that such complexity, such tensions and such compromises are not revealed by the sociology of education. They are acknowledged by educators themselves in the complex ways in which they tell stories about the justness of their actions and their beliefs. Educators are not just able to hold multiple competing explanations in their minds at once; unlike in Bourdieusian misrecognition, they are conscious of and able to articulate such competing ideas, as in the following from the Dean of Arts, Humanities and Education at New University, discussing the liberal arts degree he helped to design at another institution:

Well I call it an education [laughter]. You know, that sort of sense of a broad and preparatory education. I mean, of course you can be cynical and put it another way: that half of them might have been going back to work in Daddy's firm or something, so what they wanted was this kind of broad, enriching education 'cause they didn't actually have to go and get employment as a barrister or a doctor or something, you know [laughter].

Here the participant refers quite spontaneously to the Bourdieusian truism that non-vocational education is much more likely to be selected by the most privileged students, the 'choice of necessity' leading others to opt for degrees with clearer employment outcomes. This 'freedom from necessity' was also noted, critically, by a number of liberal arts students in interviews.

As encounters which particularly encourage justification, we might expect research interviews to elicit complex reflections of this sort. These did not seem, however, to be new ideas to participants being developed in the moment. Rather, participants weaved between different understandings of the liberal arts quite spontaneously. It was only when the interview began to be raised to the level of a dispute that specific ideas about justice were settled on, in the form of justifications. We see such justifications as legitimating illusions only if we ignore the more complex, multi-register ways in which participants speak at other times.

Conclusion

Critical sociologists of education find themselves in a bind when trying to make sense of the observable complexity of educators' understandings about education, elitism and justice. The idea of misrecognition has been stressed by Bourdieusians in order to capture the neither fully understood nor fully disavowed injustice at the heart of educational systems. In Bourdieu's

own work he is inconsistent in maintaining the strangeness of the concept; but even without the inconsistencies in Bourdieu's applications, the model's suggestion of a general field of power will tend toward reductionism because it implies that there is a fundamental truth (objective relations of power) that can explain all social action.

This article has used interview data with academics working on liberal arts degrees in England to try to demonstrate the benefits of a pragmatic sociological approach to the question of educational elitism. Thinking about the views and actions of educators through Boltanski's politics of worth may help to lead us out of the increasingly pessimistic hermeneutics of suspicion in which much critical sociology of education now finds itself entangled. We are of course obligated to show what is problematic about discourses of meritocracy, individualism and intellectual elitism. But we should also acknowledge that as educators, critical sociologists or not, we like others buy into just this discourse in much of our everyday meaning-making. When I remark to colleagues that my last seminar went well because of the presence of 'quick' or articulate students I accept that this language is legitimate, although I may then pull myself up, or be pulled up by others, according to a sociological awareness of the situation, which gives me a different conception of legitimacy and justice. We should not just argue, or hope, for a future in which this language has disappeared, but seek to understand how these inspirational and domestic worths help actors to make sense of their worlds. As Andrew Sayer (1999, 405) has written, 'Arguments about what is good or bad, what is merited or undeserved, cannot be sociologised out of existence.'

Pragmatic sociology does not lead us to a mere relativism of different conceptions of justice if we retain the notion of *legitimacy* specific to a particular context. This legitimacy is not a universal quality which takes the same form in every situation. Legitimacy is the idea that a particular economy of worth is relevant to a situation, and is something that actors, including sociologists, can dispute. This is not the unveiling of the inherent truth of a situation, but an

active engagement in live notions of justice. It is a critical stance because it takes actors to be responsible for their beliefs and seeks to hold them to account, rather than understanding those beliefs as an unconscious or semi-conscious expression of social position. The notion of the dispute, including in the research encounter itself, implies that such beliefs are context-specific and mutable, and that those who are engaged in education, including we ourselves, are reasonable and thoughtful, but not necessarily coherent or consistent, social actors.

Notes

¹ The complexity of students' actual motivations is often missed when we focus solely on how *academics* conceive of students (Hurst 2013). While I focus on lecturers' ideas about their students in this article, I have interviewed students as well as part of the same project, and will discuss that data in future publications.

² Pre-92 is a term designating those institutions that were already universities before the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 relaxed restrictions on that title. Post-92 refers to those institutions that have become universities since then. The pre-92/post-92 distinction is often used as shorthand for more or less elite status.

³ For a more thoroughgoing criticism of the role of homology in Bourdieu, see Lane (2006) and, for further critique of the abstractions of field, see Watkins (2018).

References

Atkinson, W. 2019. "Luc Boltanski's Pragmatic Sociology: A Bourdieusian Critique." *European Journal of Social Theory*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1177/1368431019855004.

Aydelotte, F. 1944. *Breaking the Academic Lock Step: The Development of Honors Work in American Colleges and Universities*. New York: Harper.

Barrett, B. D. 2012. "Is Interdisciplinarity Old News? A Disciplined Consideration of Interdisciplinarity." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 33 (1): 97-114. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2012.632868.

Bennett, T., M. Savage, E. Silva, A. Warde, M. Gayo-Cal, and D. Wright. 2009. *Culture, Class, Distinction*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Boltanski, L. (2009) 2011. *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation*. Translated by G. Elliott. Cambridge: Polity.

Boltanski, L. (1984) 2012. "Public Denunciation." Reprinted in his *Love and Justice as Competences: Three Essays on the Sociology of Action*. Translated by C. Porter. Cambridge: Polity.

Boltanski, L., and L. Thévenot. (1991) 2006. *On Justification: Economies of Worth*. Translated by C. Porter. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) 1988. *Homo Academicus*. Translated by P. Collier. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1980) 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1988) 1991. *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger*. Translated by P. Collier. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1984) 1993. *Sociology in Question*. Translated by R. Nice. London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1989) 1996. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Translated by L. C. Clough. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P. (1997) 2000. *Pascalian Meditations*. Translated by R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity.

Bourdieu, P., with L. Wacquant. 1989. "For a Socio-Analysis of Intellectuals: On *Homo Academicus*." Translated by L. Wacquant. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 34: 1-29.

Bourdieu, P., with L. Boltanski, R. Castel, J-C Chamboredon, and D. Schnapper. (1965) 1990. *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*. Translated by S. Whiteside. Cambridge: Polity.

Bouzanis, C., and S. Kemp. 2019. "The Two Stories of the Habitus/Structure Relation and the Riddle of Reflexivity: A Meta-Theoretical Reappraisal." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/jtsb.12225.

Brewer, T. 2018. "What Good Are the Humanities?" *Raritan* 37 (4): 98-118.

Brown, P., and A. Hesketh. 2004. *The Mismanagement of Talent: Employability and Jobs in the Knowledge Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brown, P., H. Lauder, and D. Ashton. 2011. *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs, and Incomes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Burke, C. T., N. Emmerich, and N. Ingram. 2013. "Well-Founded Social Fictions: A Defence of the Concepts of Institutional and Familial Habitus." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 34 (2): 165-182. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2012.746263.

Burke, P. J., and J. McManus. 2011. "Art for a Few: Exclusions and Misrecognitions in Higher Education Admissions Practices." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32 (5): 699-712. doi: 10.1080/01596306.2011.620753.

Collins, R. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. New York: Academic Press.

Cremin, L. A. 1970. *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*. New York: Harper and Row.

Croxford, L., and D. Raffe. 2015. "The Iron Law of Hierarchy? Institutional Differentiation in UK Higher Education." *Studies in Higher Education* 40 (9): 1625-1640. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2014.899342.

Hurst, A. L. 2013. "Student Types as Reflection of Class Habitus: An Application of Bourdieu's Scholastic Fallacy." *Theory and Research in Education* 11 (1): 43-61. doi: 10.1177/1477878512468383.

James, D. 2015. "How Bourdieu Bites Back: Recognising Misrecognition in Education and Educational Research." *Cambridge Journal of Education* 45 (1): 97-112. doi: 10.1080/0305764X.2014.987644.

Kimball, B. A. 1986. *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*. New York: Teachers' College Press.

Lahire, B. (2001) 2011. *The Plural Actor*. Translated by D. Fernbach. Cambridge: Polity.

Lahire, B. 2015. "The Limits of the Field: Elements for a Theory of the Social Differentiation of Activities." In *Bourdieu's Theory of Social Fields: Concepts and Applications*, edited by M. Hilgers and E. Mangez, 62-101. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Lane, J. 2006. *Bourdieu's Politics: Problems and Possibilities*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Leathwood, C., and P. O'Connell. 2003. "'It's a Struggle': The Construction of the 'New Student' in Higher Education." *Journal of Education Policy* 18 (6): 597-615. doi: 10.1080/0268093032000145863.
- Rothblatt, S. 1976. *Tradition and Change in English Liberal Education: An Essay in History and Culture*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Sayer, A. 1999. "Bourdieu, Smith and Disinterested Judgement." *Sociological Review* 47 (3): 403-431. doi: 10.1111/1467-954X.00179.
- Susen, S., and B. S. Turner, eds. 2014. *The Spirit of Luc Boltanski: Essays on the 'Pragmatic Sociology of Critique.'* London: Anthem.
- Taylor, M. C. 2009. "End the University as We Know It." *New York Times*, April 26.
- Tholen, G., S. J. Relly, C. Warhurst, and J. Commander. 2016. "Higher Education, Graduate Skills and the Skills of Graduates: The Case of Graduates as Residential Sales Estate Agents." *British Educational Research Journal* 42 (3): 508-523. doi: 10.1002/berj.3222.
- Thomson, P. 2014. "'Scaling Up' Educational Change: Some Musings on Misrecognition and Doxic Challenges." *Critical Studies in Education* 55 (2): 87-103. doi: 10.1080/17508487.2014.863221.
- Watkins, M. 2018. "Little Room for Capacitation: Rethinking Bourdieu on Pedagogy as Symbolic Violence." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39 (1): 47-60. doi: 10.1080/01425692.2017.1304202.

Watkins, M. 2018. "Time, Space and the Scholarly Habitus: Thinking Through the Phenomenological Dimensions of Field." *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 50 (13): 1240-1248. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2017.1396537.

Wrong, D. 1961. "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology." *American Sociological Review* 26 (2): 183-193. doi: 10.2307/2089854.