Dark satanic mills to ivory towers: an interview with Sally R Munt, Emeritus Professor of Cultural Politics, University of Sussex, UK; and Louise Morley, Professor of Higher Education, Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER), University of Sussex, UK

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Dark satanic mills to ivory towers

An interview with Sally R Munt*, Emeritus Professor of Cultural Politics, University of Sussex, UK; and Louise Morley, Professor of Higher Education, Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER), University of Sussex, UK

Sally R Munt is Emeritus Professor of Cultural Politics and former Director of the University of Sussex Centre for Cultural Studies. Sally’s writing has primarily been concerned with social justice research, and particularly with cultures and identities of otherness. She has published extensively on cultural forms of sexuality, gender, class, narrative, space, religion and spirituality, shame, paranormality, and more latterly in Refugee Studies. She is also, since 2015, the founder/director of the charity Brighton Exiled/Refugee Trauma Service. As well as being an academic, she is a BABCP accredited cognitive behavioural psychotherapist in private practice, and has also trained in Psychiatry. We invited Sally to consider the affective complexities of social mobility in her own life and more widely, for this special issue on social class in higher education.

Louise Morley is Professor of Higher Education and Director of the Centre for Higher Education and Equity Research (CHEER) at the University of Sussex. Louise has an international profile in the field of the sociology of gender in higher education, and has published extensively on power, equity and inclusion in higher education. Her research interests include gender and leadership; equity and internationalisation; an intersectional approach to widening participation, and the micropolitics of gender.

**Keywords:** working class academic; class mobility; life-writing; structures of feeling; *habitus*

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LM: Sally, how do you believe that your class background has interacted generally with higher education opportunities and constraints?

SM: In terms of opportunities, my generation is a product of the UK 1944 Education Act, which introduced the tripartite system at secondary level. This funnelled children into 'class appropriate' futures via the technical college, the secondary modern, and the grammar school. I was amongst the less than 20% that passed the 11 plus examination in 1971, and was lucky enough to go to a single sex girl’s grammar school in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. My mother and her sisters had also gone to Greenhead High School for Girls in the 1930s, when attendance was fee paying, their grocer father scrimping together the money to pay. Although my mother and my aunts were clever young women, they were bullied at school for being poor and for being dirty; they had no mother at home and my grandfather wasn’t much interested in feeding and washing his daughters or washing their clothes. In 1971, academic streaming for British children was coming to an end, partly as a result of that son of Huddersfield – Harold Wilson – and the policies of his Labour Government. However, Greenhead has always had an outstanding record of academic achievement with its oaken ‘honours board’ in the entrance hall, listing every girl that went to Oxbridge, scribed in gold letters. The teachers were very dedicated, clever and proud women who instilled strong values in the girls. It was a bit of a benign, Yorkshire version of the Muriel Spark novel *The Pride of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) although with a much better ending. I remember well our school assemblies when the length of our skirts would be measured by a ruler (no more than 3 inches above the knee), and the colour of our knickers checked (compulsory navy). I can still sing the school song too – ‘We shall look back/when we are here no more...’ – written by Old Girl Eva Madden in 1938, who subsequently became a missionary in India. The redoubtable headmistress (1957–1971) Miss Margaret Owen informed us in 1973 that ‘The true Greenheader is outgoing and responsible, stalwart and trustworthy; she is cheerful and purposeful. She realises that because much has been given to her, much is required of her’ (Cocker, 1973, p. 1).

I realise that my academic success owes much to this single-sex grammar school, and its pedagogical confidence in girls. This education is what got me into university as it instilled in me critical thinking skills, a studying ethic, and the confidence and expectation that I would go ‘further’. It was also a quintessentially British cultural training, iced with a bit of Northern Pride. I remain aware that my own class mobility left behind my friends from junior school who didn’t pass the 11-Plus, and I lost touch with them.

As I teenager I converted to Evangelical Christianity, and gained a place at Manchester University to study Theology. Instead, aged 19, I ran off to join a religious community in Dorset. It was an intentional community that lived on the family estate of a Baronet, but after three years I was thrown out of it for being too rebellious. I got a degree in English and Media Studies locally in Weymouth, and then went on to Sussex University to do Masters and PhD. I taught at four other universities and then landed back at Sussex University in 2001, from which I recently took early retirement due to ill health.
I didn’t succeed purely on my own merits, this is a typical neoliberal narrative projection; I succeeded because of the collective support I’d had from childhood that instilled self-belief: my family taught me I had a right to ideas, my school trained me in how to master them, and my parents encouraged me and imparted a strong work ethic. None of us achieve such careers alone, despite the atomised self-belief that pervades university life, we are not income-generating reputational singularities so much as affective units who are held together by others. All of our ideas occur because intellectually we synthesise and recombine the ideas of others in whose social soup we swim, we are networked, and that net fertilises all of our energies. The lone genius idea (which academia rarifies and reifies) is a precocious affectation of Enlightenment thinking, a peculiarly masculinist fantasy of isolation, of remote seclusion. Yet all of those guys had wives, friends, lovers, and almost certainly servants.

LM: But weren’t some of the original university scholars monks – men who were able to devote their entire existence to the life of the mind? That occupational requirement seems to remain today!

SM: Really? In which case, they were designed to consolidate the religious and ideological power of the clerisy. Perhaps my original intention to study Theology was a bit of medieval upward mobility!

I have spent my adult life in the South of England in middle-class environments but I grew up working-class – my mother was a landlady and a secretary at Huddersfield Polytechnic; my father built portacabins for most of his life. He put in a few disconsolate years repairing council houses, followed by a spell as a roaming carpenter for Yorkshire Water. His last job meant driving to the reservoirs up on the moors in order to repair their engineering buildings. Dad would eat his sandwiches whilst looking out onto the beauty of the ‘rez’, and write me weekly letters describing which birds he’d tempted to eat crumbs out of his hand. I came from a working-class intellectual family of auto-didacts who read widely, argued assiduously, and were never ever short of a political opinion. When I read E. P. Thompson’s (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* (nearly 1,000 pages!), I would read excerpts to my Father who would comment knowledgeably on the events that happened around Huddersfield, participating in this memorable ‘history from below’. Similar to Raymond Williams, I too was a grammar school upstart that suffered unsteady feet standing astride this ‘border country’ (Williams, 1988). My class mobility was only made possible because for my generation, not only were university fees non-existent, we received a Local Authority maintenance grant. There is a whole generation of working-class grammar school girls and boys who have been building the higher education system in the UK for the past 40–50 years or so, all of whose journey was enabled by the egalitarianism of previous Labour governments. Those scholars are now retiring, and their strong principles of an interventionist state, equality, and education for the social good are in danger of being erased by the new captains of neoliberalism who think of universities as factories for making profit. I don’t think we’ve moved past the Industrial Revolution as much as we think.

LM: There was also the famous 1963 Robbins Report that advocated equality and expansion of the higher education system. This drove the development of so many new
universities and advocated that university places should be available to anyone qualified to apply for them. Robbins also foregrounded gender as in the 1960s fewer women undertook higher education than men. \(^1\) We are of the generation that benefited from this important policy intervention. How has it been for you, Sally, not just to enter higher education as a student from a working-class background, but to ascend to its highest academic role?

SM: In terms of constraints, living in the south of England, I have felt continuously like a fish out of water. I have found higher education (HE) profoundly silencing, and despite fighting against that all of my career I think it has got significantly worse in recent years. To be middle class in academia is to be a ‘fish swimming in water’ as Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992) explained:

> [W]hen habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted could, to make sure that I am well understood, [to] explicate Pascal’s formula: the world encompasses me (*me comprend*) but I comprehend it (*je le comprends*) precisely because it comprises me. It is because this world has produced me, because it has produced the categories of thought that I apply to it, that it appears to me as self-evident. (pp. 127–128)

The ubiquity of middle-class *habitus* expresses why it is so difficult to perceive privilege when one is swimming within it, elitism is weightless. The pervasive anxiety of middle-class life is linked to the maintenance and preservation of that status. It is this binarism of ease/anxiety that is so distinctive to the middle-class affective habitus. Feeling like a fish out of water has meant that my relationship to higher education has always been vexed, floundering like there is never enough oxygen, which is of course, rather damaging to the body in the long term. Although over the decades I’ve developed a ‘feel for the game’, I wouldn’t say I was comfortable.

LM: Do you have any specific examples of incidents of being made aware of your class background in your professorial role?

SM: I have so many! Being queer and working class made me a very unlikely professorial candidate and I think I had an atypical eight books published by the time I was promoted. I remember the Dean at that time opening a formal disciplinary investigation that accused me of using university funds to go on holiday to Greece with my girlfriend (who was then Director of HR, making this scenario ridiculously unlikely). It was prompted by a malicious attack by the outgoing chair who was raging once he realised that I wasn’t going to be his shoe-in proxy when I took over as Chair. The Dean’s investigation inevitably concluded that there was no case to answer, but in one of the conversations I had with her during said spurious investigation she demanded to know ‘Why all lesbians are always so angry?!’ (She was actually spitting with fury when she said it.) Shortly afterwards, when she was promoted to being the titular University Diversity Chair or some-such, I remember feeling resigned about her unacknowledged homophobia, but I also recognised that it was an intersectional micro-aggression, because I had breached that unspoken rule that nice middle-class women should never show anger (even when they’re being victimised, in fact particularly then!). There was an unspoken
understanding that her spitting rage had ‘never happened’; it was institutional gaslighting. If you are queer and working class, and also disabled, you can be crushed from many angles.

In many contexts, I have a big mouth, I have an opinion and I’m not afraid to speak it even if it makes me unpopular and is particularly aggravating to university managers I’m sure. I’ve never learned to protect myself by shutting up and nodding agreement. It has been difficult, but for the legacy of believing I have a right to dispute, and stand up for myself, I thank my parents. The addiction to conformity is an epidemic in university fora (less so in the corridors – but quiet grumbling doesn’t really achieve much if dissent isn’t vocalised and collectivised). There is a dissociative disorder in academic life, that radical research and publication doesn’t necessarily translate into forms of political activism by the writer as such. Bizarrely, passions can be neutralised by the shadow of ‘bias’ and researching contentious subjects can make the author compensate with institutionalised amenability. There is also the failure to recognise the emotional cost involved in being a minority researcher, something that those wearing a dominant cloak of invisibility can escape.

There is an unofficial discourse of politeness, of manners, of reason, of neutrality and objectivity demanded of academics that is steeped in a specifically classed performance of white English masculinity, perhaps even monkism! This somatised presentation is compulsory and we are still so terrible at recognising the normative organisational affects that circumscribe our daily lives. Let us recall that in the UK less than 1% of Professors are Black, here are the appalling statistics from the Equality in Higher Education document (2019/20):

There are 19,285 professors in UK universities in total according to a 2019 report by AdvanceHE; 12,795 are white males, 4,560 are white women. There are 90 black men and 35 black women.²

What kinds of stoic, resilient, performances have been required from those 35 black women professors to succeed? There are no published statistics on lesbian professors, black, brown or white, or any commissioned research that I know of. Minority groups of all hues are required to learn that strong feelings about anything at all are to be elided. This masquerade covers up a wide system of coercive control that judges any emotional display at work to be not only disruptive but a piquant failure to adapt to the required somatic register of bland containment. Protestant restraint is required to enact the disciplinarity essential to professional academic life. This is in spite of the many injurious speech acts experienced by minority scholars of all hues which create legacies of hurt. (Academics are also particularly good at shunning someone until they learn to ‘behave’.) The idea of dispassionate masculinity that pervades and constrains academic life actually veils the emotional abuse that is so prevalent within it, and it also maintains an ongoing pretence that academic culture is moderate, neutral and genteel. The academy is emotionally cold, like a distant father whose affirmation we crave, and rarely receive!

We achieve status in academia through mimicry to some extent, but that mimicry can be more intentional or conscious to those who originate from outside the dominant ethnic culture catchment pool. Like victims of abuse we learn to read carefully how the dominant social and cultural practices operate to keep us in line, we learn well the habitus of the academic with its repressive conventions. A dominant habitus is unquestionably enforced by majority consent. I have noted over the years how quickly middle managers
appropriate corporate jargon, as though this virile business model of higher education can demonstrate efficiency, effectiveness and sincerity. The university-business model has strategically disinvested in an actual vision of education in and for itself, instead it has commodified knowledge and co-opted it into the wealth accumulation of global capitalism, auguring the ‘McDonaldisation’ of higher education.

LM: I like your observation on the crassness of jargon. I find it profoundly anti-intellectual and tediously tired and stale. I keep calling out lazy language in documentation and meetings like ‘punching above our weight’, and ‘windows of opportunity’. But maybe that is because I have never been allowed to be sloppy!

SM: I know what you mean! When I came to work in an ‘elite’ university from an ex-polytechnic, I noticed immediately how much scruffier everyone looked, and how such clothing styles changed in relation to status – office staff looked generally smart, but professors can wear jeans. Being ‘extremely relaxed’ about somatic signalling at work is a deeply classed issue. Of course, being made a professor signals powerful symbolic capital, and when I was made professor in 2002, an older, wiser friend said to me ‘Sally, relax, you’ve made it, there’s nowhere else to go’. It was a bizarre moment because working-class academics don’t really know how to stop striving, women in particular, and women professors in the UK don’t often wear jeans. I almost always published more than my peers, I did more reviewing, panel work, editing, tutorials, and mentoring than most – this Protestant work ethic has shaped my life and it is probably why I’m worn out now! I never escaped the feeling of being constantly monitored and evaluated, perhaps the middle-class anxiety eventually possessed me as my habitus evolved. Ironically, the institutional power that professorial status bestows is required to be ritually disavowed, its habitus should be practised discretely as a form of calculated humility. This of course is another lie, and actually embodying such potency is a tightrope where you are balancing power with frantic self-effacement, polishing your international ‘brand’ but in seemingly modest, unintentional ways. Academia requires your brand to ‘rise above’, to be visibly distinct, it is deeply anti-collaborative and privileges individual competition whilst also denying its association with anything so common.

LM: What do you consider to be the main social class issues today in higher education?

SM: The most pressing issue for me remains this ongoing and vicious deniability of class oppression, and the overwhelming, naturalised and commonsense superiority of white middle-class morés and structures of feeling. The social invisibility of class was reinforced for me during the recent lockdown when a meme on Facebook pointed out that ‘lockdown is where middle-class people stay at home and working-class people bring them stuff’. The endless complaints about being stuck at home simply grate with me, as much of my voluntary work involves working with people who are homeless, living in hostels, or in substandard subcontracted Home Office accommodation.

Working and underclass people are still relegated ‘below stairs’, and it is reciprocated by faculty who believe their peers solely to represent ‘the university’ when in fact half of the workforce labour away unseen and mainly unacknowledged, in a service capacity...
(like my mother did). The everyday casual contempt that academics display for ‘administrators’, or the condescending affection with which ‘the school office’ is depersonalised, are also part of this reductive thinking (in which people are collapsed into functions and we inhabit the Victorian dichotomy between upstairs and downstairs where admin staff servants are required to be silent and invisible). You can see this distanciation enacted whenever there is a ‘school social’, in which the academics sit at one table, or stand in one corner, and the administrators at another, it is very tribal. (I recommend going to the pub with our administrative colleagues by the way, and then you will find out which academics treat them badly, and it is not always whom you expect). In universities we don’t talk much about the feminisation of poverty in our workplaces, that most low-level administrators, cleaners, and caterers are women, and their rates of pay are shocking. As a counterpoint to that, I remember picketing one year and yelling ‘support the strike’, and one of the contracted-out security officers said to me ‘I do, but if I join you, I’ll lose my job, love’; it’s still a privilege to strike.

We live in critical times vis-à-vis the worldwide destruction of the welfare state. In post-1992 universities, following the 2020 pandemic, Humanities programmes are going to the wall as Vice-Chancellors streamline ‘income generating’ vocational programmes. Effectively we are returning to a pre-1992 divisions between elite universities teaching subjects like History, Art, Literature, Philosophy to middle-class ‘thinkers’, and engineering, IT, nursing and social work being the designated career path for working-class ‘doers’. We are back to the mind/hand dichotomy of skills that Marx first identified 150 years ago. In terms of institutional processes, the core purpose of modern university life is to ensure that class distinctions are maintained, we are actually in the business of creating and maintaining class divisions through skills acquisition and differentiation – and it is no coincidence that degrees are awarded according to ‘classes’, from ‘honours’ to ‘ordinary’. Sometimes the deeper truths are the most blatant.

Universities in the UK have embraced an economic shift first inaugurated by Thatcherism, the instrumentalist model of higher education-for-profit rather than the common good. In post-war UK working-class autodidacts used to be able to access universities in forms of mass education via community and adult education programmes, the pillar of the liberal arts institution representing all that was best about what we call now ‘impact and engagement’. These programmes, along with the educational subsidies that were offered to mature students, are all but gone, and today’s working-class students are now so saddled with debt, their potential for radicalism has been blunted as they’re too exhausted by funding their studies to stretch themselves further or take risks.

LM: As a psychotherapist as well as a professor, what do you consider to be the main features of the affective economy of social class?

SM: In my clinical practice, I often encounter the ‘hidden injuries of class’, any therapist alert to their patients’ needs to consider the social context in which their patient draws meaning. I wrote a piece years ago on shame, hate and envy in institutional cultures (Munt, 2007), and I believe those affective economies to be worse now, although I think nowadays I’m better at managing the personal damage. Raymond Williams’ (1961) ‘structures of feeling’ is useful for understanding the emotional politics of higher education. A predominantly bourgeois structure of feeling typifies academic cultures, in
which ‘passion’ must be tempered by ‘logic’. Working-class people tend to be more openly expressive and intense about their passions, middle-class people locate this specifically in their artists, or in the bohemian traditions. Indeed, suspicion of intense emotion, of passion, typifies middlebrow culture. Consider momentarily the passion that Brexit stimulated in the British (well, the English really) lower middle classes and working classes. And now we have to think about the structures of feeling in class fractions, for example the contempt for the white working class that is shown by the middle class, but actually the biggest demographic to vote for these populist projects were lower middle-class business owners, the petit bourgeoisie, forever squeezed and striving toward respectability and acceptance.

The issue is that in modern times a middle-class \textit{habitus} has become so desirable, so aspirational, that it is practically impossible to want to be anything else. Even in the movie industry, which has a long history of problematising (nay – fetishizing) middle-class anxiety, the status continues to be validated simply by virtue of its ubiquity. Also, middle-class culture loves to regard itself. Middle-class identity is non-identity in university life, because the bourgeois \textit{dispositif} is so invisible and all-pervasive; presumably a couple of hundred years ago the cultural norm was upper class and thus universities, it could be argued, have ‘dumbed down’ although the shadow of the gentleman (monkish) scholar prevails even now. But it is an evolving fact of the ‘squeezed middle’ that the luxury of economic safety is being whittled away by neoliberalist strategies, so that it’s becoming rather like the phantasm of selfhood – it was thought that middle-class people had one (Skeggs, 2004) – but the ownership of selfhood is being exposed as universally chimeric, as financial instability and exploitation worms itself into and destabilises from within the foundation stones of the ivory towers, confronting early and now mid-career scholars with the kind of unstable job market that historically was more pertaining to inferior classes. How did we get into the position that in 2020, 68\% of academic contracts are now temporary – I wonder if it is because as a workforce so many eschew union membership, they really don’t seem to understand the regulatory and restrictive terms and conditions of their employment.\textsuperscript{3} Despite this creeping (and overwhelming) disenfranchisement, here remains a mirage of privilege in the mindset of university faculty, that our jobs are eased by self-determination and self-expression. This can lead to an intentional forgetting at the core of our work, so that rather than being salaried employees, in our minds we are free individuals who are gifting themselves to the [patient sigh] necessity of the university duties. This is a deluded position of libertarian patronage that continues to shape attitudes to university work (the tedious work that we know is over-represented by women). It results in a kind of Cartesian split – our bodies may be exhausted by the exploding workloads, yet our minds disassociate and cling on to the idea of ourselves as ‘privileged’ auteurs.

\textbf{LM:} As a feminist scholar of queer issues – especially in relation to Cultural Studies – how do you think social class, sexuality and gender identity intersect?

\textbf{SM:} Within queer communities, it still remains perfectly acceptable to express horror about ‘low-class’ orientations, values and taste. I’ve lost count of the casually contemptuous remarks made by queer and feminist academics about working-class people; this could be displaced shame, as is their racism (see Munt, 2019). The scramble
to teach at an ‘elite’ university is complicated, because I think it becomes a compensatory mechanism for some, to escape homophobic and/or class shame and find pride in at least one aspect of their subjectivity. I feel such sadness when I see minority scholars displaying superior attitudes, because I always want to see cross-identification and empathy, but of course this is idealistic and ignores how contempt works to create illusions of superiority.

LM: Is there also the point about us being unsure of our readings of quotidian micro-aggressions? For example, it is often challenging to ascertain whether being outside the group is because of homophobia, or maybe misogyny, or perhaps not belonging to the dominant class, or a complex coagulation of all these otherings?

SM: Well the phenomenon of micro-aggressions is interesting because when Campbell and Manning (2014) did their research on American university campuses, they found that the less status the student had, the less likely they were to be vocal about micro-aggressions; the other finding was that those complaining of micro-aggressions were most likely to appeal to powerful third parties, investing that authority with the power to resolve them. So, their research argued that ironically those raising micro-aggressions were apt to make appeals to social power in other domains of their life. They argued, quite subtly, that the relative cultural empowerment of North American university students demonstrates an ethos of entitlement.

LM: How interesting! This might also relate to how some members of dominant groups have recast themselves as victims of affirmative action strategies and policies in higher education, even to the point of taking legal action (Justin, 2020)!

SM: I don’t think we have progressed Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) concept of intersectionality very much. It has come to be widely misinterpreted as a kind of competitive victimhood in which each minority status is an inverted bonus, a kind of summative rather than evaluative framework for analysis and a call for social justice. Compounded discrimination remains challenging to research because it requires so many more empirical studies to comprehend the nuances of how oppression is lived. White, heterosexual, gender-conforming middle-class women in higher education may sometimes describe themselves as feminists, but are often strategic about ignoring their privilege and the ways in which they diminish others, we often remain stuck in binary thinking and its simplifications. How do we hold powerful women like Ghislaine Maxwell and Ivana Trump to account? Presumably they’ve also considered themselves to be role models to other women?! What are we to do about the 55% of white women who voted for Trump, many of them college-educated? What are we to do about the fact that more LGBTQ Americans voted for Trump in 2020 than in 2016?! Do we pretend to ourselves that all faculty vote liberal/Left? Of course they don’t! What are we to do too about institutional gaslighting in universities, when managers trumpet inclusivity strategies and promote ‘caring capitalism’ in their bulletins, whilst simultaneously selling off part of the university service sectors to private subcontractors who impose harsher employment conditions and the evisceration of workers’ rights? What do we do about the fact that in the main, people approve of a market economy and eschew equality – what
they regard with suspicion as social engineering – most people actually support the status quo? Visceral protectionism, not cosmopolitanism or egalitarianism, infuses how most people vote.

**LM:** What part do you believe that HE can play in disrupting social class hierarchies?

**SM:** Historically, within western social democracies, higher education has provided significant shifts in class identification and belonging. More latterly, and brutally – I don’t believe that HE can be much of a disruptor without profound shifts in the way we finance education from pre-school to PhD. Neoliberalism has soaked into and poisoned all of our institutionalised practices and assumptions. Our grading system is like the Holy Grail of classification, we invest such meaning into this temple of distinction, and yet … I have knowingly over-graded work from students that I know are struggling to juggle jobs and study, or have language obstacles. I don’t really care about this because I’ve ceased to believe in the neutrality or even general principal of grading. I support a pass/fail structure of assessment. Many colleagues will tell you quietly that they have their own little subversions, despite the system trying to impose a machinic neutrality, human tactics persist, usually down to individual ethics and conscience and an inchoate desire to ‘level the playing field’. I’d like us to remember that minorities of all hues have been historically under-graded, and that there is always discretion in grading, let no one pretend otherwise.

**LM:** What advice do you have for students and academic staff from working-class backgrounds in today’s academy?

**SM:** Fake it to make it. Do not get too hung up on grades, don’t pull the ladder up after yourself, but do not be afraid to swear! Seriously, we must recognise the transformative quality of higher education for working-class students (who may eventually become staff). On entering the university, the working-class student is encountering an unfamiliar field, but of course Bourdieu (1990) argued that the *habitus* will mutate in relation to a new field, and a hybrid or even split *habitus* may form, sometimes split against itself. We are required to adapt to new fields and create and fashion new kinds of *habitus*, and in entering higher education at all it is debatable whether in terms of status this is a classification shift or not. By the time those PhDs have been awarded, those of us who are from (and continue to have) working-class histories inevitably have some kind of blended discomfort, or disjunction toward our social relocation, with some of us perhaps more eager to shuck off that history and its legacies than others. Self-improvement is part of a strong working-class ethic too, as is working hard, and having loyalty and a collective awareness. So, my thought here would be that higher education will change you, but much more hopefully – you might change it.

**LM:** What are your wishes, desires, and critical hopes for the future for social class and HE?

**SM:** Educational achievement is by its nature exclusionary as it is designed to classify human subjects according to their knowledge and skills capital. The whole higher
education system is calculated to operate on a principle of exclusion, hierarchisation, and ‘refinement’. I recall that under one particularly radical Vice-Chancellor, Thames Valley University (1992–2011) accepted numbers of mature, part-time and minority students onto programmes within their catchment area – an area of west London (Brentford, Ealing, Reading and Slough) that was then characterised by working-class populations – without formal entrance requirements. As a social experiment its open-door policy of inclusivity and opportunity was brave and visionary but short-lived due to being economically unsupportable without better government funding. For more than two decades I have done PhD admissions, and my approach to this has always to be as welcoming as possible because I believe that if you have the minimum skills required, you should be supported through researching something you care about. This has put me at odds with other colleagues doing PhD admissions, whose ethos is more traditionally about ‘awarding’ places. My view is that universities should strive to be more open, and offer students a chance, take a punt on someone and remember that non-traditional entrants have other kinds of wisdom to impart. We need to consider how to widen the doors. If we keep restricting access to higher education to only those with existing symbolic, economic and social capital, we impoverish ourselves and even, ultimately, our national economy.

**LM:** Thank you so much, Sally, for such an eloquent and erudite set of rich reflections. Lots of good wishes for the next stage of your brilliant career in retirement or recalibration!

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**Notes**

1 See the 2013 CHEER event Robbins Report 50 Years On: Feminist Responses.  
http://www.sussex.ac.uk/education/cheer/events/archive201314

2 Available at https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/equality-higher-education-statistical-report-2019


4 Various news sources cited this extraordinary voting pattern, for example https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/11/04/donald-trump-joe-biden-lgbt-votes-2020-2016-election-edison-research-national-election-pool/ Accessed 9 November 2020. We urgently need more research to investigate such contra-indicative voting trends, but please see also Munt (2019) for understanding how gay shame gets transferred into racism.

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