

Beyond 'the mire of laws and figures'? Class in, during and after Higher Education

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Class and Irish Higher Education

- Class much discussed but narrowly framed (Finnegan, 2012, 2014; Fleming, Loxley & Finnegan, 2017). Ongoing research in a European network EMPLOY (O'Neill & Finnegan, 2014).
- From 'elite' to 'mass' system 1960-2000s. The role and meaning of HE in society has radically altered.
- New dilemmas and contradictions in a Knowledge Based Economy imaginary (Sum & Jessop, 2013) where education is tasked with meeting a startling range of objectives.
- How to deal with the existence of persistent inequalities? 1990s → plethora of policy and legislative documents related to access (University Act 1997; HEA, 2001, 2008, 2014; *inter alia*). *Report from Action Group on Access Third Level Education* (HEA, 2001) key document.

The role of social science

- Patrick Clancy's has had a profound influence on access policy (1982, 1988, 1995, 2001; Clancy & Wall, 2000; see also O'Connell, 2005).
- Quantitative research on participation rates of socio-economic groups (SEGs) linked to geography, sector, institution and disciplines. Traced continuities and changes in class inequality.
- But “categorical approaches are [now] viewed as the only approach with which to conceptualise the relationship between disadvantage, social class and access to higher education” (Bernard, 2006. p. 32).
- Social science → policy → managerial target.

The cramping of the sociological imagination?



Mind the gaps!

- Emphasis onto entry point to HE rather than on student experience and long term destinations. HE still remains a mysterious “black box” (Lynch and O’Riordan, 1998). Reflects the enduring power of human capital model in HE policy.
- Thin conception of class which has limited explanatory value in explaining the causes or full impact of class inequality
- Disconnected from theories of social change be that elite intervention and/or popular agency.
- Overall not sufficient to understand interplay between structure and agency (Bhaskar, 1979; Sayer, 1992).

Researching class differently

- Use of biographical methods and voice (Finnegan, 2012; Finnegan, Merrill and Thunborg, 2014; Finnegan, Fleming and Loxley (forthcoming)).
- Before, during and after college. Importance of what happens next (Burke, 2016; Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2010)
- Holistic approach and biographical methods -the EMPLOY project – 6 country study of transitions into labour market including sizeable cohort of working class students of different ages.
- What do biographies tell us ? Rachel, Luke and James.

An adequate theory of class

- Relational not categorical. Capable of naming multidimensional nature of class experience and relations. Economic, cultural, social, spatial, moral and affective dimensions requires variety of theoretical and empirical resources (Wright, 2014; Sayer, 2015).
- Various modes of class identification
- Reflexivity and classisifcation struggles
- The role of the political in class formation
- Social space as layered and differentiated but interconnected (Bourdieu, 1984 ; Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2014;Thompson, 1963).

Implications for research and practice

- Need for complex, relational conception of social class.
- Access as a broad process which relies on delicate ecosystem of supports. Need to explore long term impact of HE.
- Framing access with a more vivid sociological imagination. Less procedural and individualised: focus on agency and capacities (Marginson, 2011).
- Importance of listening to student voices (Finnegan, Merrill & Thunborg, 2014).
- Trouble the boundaries and practices of the university in order to create genuinely democratic, critical and inclusive spaces of education (Crean, 2008).

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