Reappraising Charles Webb's *The Graduate* (1963): Exploring cultural and historical elements of a character in the contemporary economy

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Abstract
This article seeks to examine, in a cultural–historical perspective, how the 'graduate' has developed as a character central to a significant segment of the contemporary labour market. The argument begins by showing how the rise of the 'new' or 'knowledge economy' (throughout the 1990s and 2000s) became a new source of pressure on generations entering the world of work. Higher education has been, and continues to be, presented by political, corporate and educational institutions as a core platform upon which future possibilities of personal achievement and accomplishment depend. Gradually, the vocabulary and character of the 'graduate' has become more visible through complex and refined modes of cultural dissemination. The themes through which this character is articulated today have, we argue, cultural roots that are not entirely new. With reference to David Riesman's early understanding of the formation of this kind of cultural 'character', we examine Charles Webb's 1963 novel *The Graduate*. As a cultural–historical resource, it can be revisited half a century later in order to investigate the historical movement of certain themes and questions that now outline what a 'graduate' could and should be. The imperatives that underlie the labour market for graduate schemes open up questions that pertain not only to immediate matters of employment. Rather, the discourses of 'graduate work' and 'employability' now appropriate deeper concerns regarding the meaning of individual freedom, choice and self-determination. Who is the 'graduate' and what are some of its cultural roots?

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to interrogate how the 'graduate' has become a figure of such interest in the formulation and dissemination of certain ideas and ideals about what a managerial career might promise to those who pursue university education. How has this figure acquired the contours of its character? What cultural roots and resources nurture the motifs which surround it in the new and rapidly expanding advertising literature in public, corporate and university contexts? As we will show, the prominence that the 'graduate' figure attained in the 1990s and 2000s in the so-called 'new' or 'knowledge economy' (Brown and Hesketh, 2004; Castells, 2011; Drucker, 1969, 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Von Krogh, Ichijo, and Nonaka, 2000) points to elements which have been present in the vocabulary of liberal and neoliberal thinking through previous decades (Foucault, 2008; Lasch, 1979, 1984; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Slobodian, 2018). In particular, as Foucault (2008) showed in 1978–1979, it is a particular version of an entrepreneurial, highly individualistic and self-driven *homo oeconomicus* that features at the centre of this new economic age (pp. 225–227).

Our aim is to explore how this figure appears not just in political, business or economic discourses, but also in literature as early as the 1960s. Among the sources of that decade, Charles Webb's (1981 [1963]) novel *The Graduate* is (and not simply because of its title) one of the significant contributions to the study of the kind of character whose direction in life, after acquiring a prestigious university degree, turns out to be more fraught and marked by uncertainty and anxiety than might be expected for a comfortable, middle-class, son of a typical successful American family. Webb's portrayal of his protagonists' characters is not alone in that period. In 1961, Richard Yates published *Revolutionary Road* and, in 1963, Sylvia Plath (1963) published her only novel, *The Bell Jar*. Like Webb's, both are studies of characters that, in the 1950s and 1960s, face post-war promises of emancipation through corporate careers with just as much anxiety and uncertainty as Webb's.

What Webb, Yates and Plath all show is that inflated promises of happy, self-fulfilled, successful lives, made possible by progressive managerial career possibilities, are, in fact, sources of intense and negative pressures concealed in an unsustainable understanding of the 'self' as a 'project' (Grey, 1994). Webb's novel in particular offers a productive historical entry-point for interpreting the evolution of the ideal graduate in the form it takes today. In this respect, this article offers a time-bound and contextually rooted cultural interpretation of one of the original, and lasting, iterations of a social character that has become increasingly discernible in the past two decades. The rise of the 'graduate' has been analysed from a range of other perspectives: economic (Eckaus, 1962; Heller, 1997; Leslie and Brinkman, 1988; Paulsen, 2001; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004), demographic (Anderson, 2003; Archer et al., 2002; Blundell et

al., 2000; Hodgkinson, 1985; Keller, 2001; Swil, 2002), sociological (Barnett, 1994; Gumport, 2008; Naidoo, 2003; Scott, 1995; Sewell and Shah, 1967; Shavit et al., 2007), or policy-related (Ball, 2012; Shattock, 2008; Taylor and Miroiu, 2002).

However, there have been far fewer attempts to examine in cultural–historical terms the 'graduate' as a *character* at the centre of this segment of the managerial labour market (interestingly, cultural anthropologists have been preoccupied more recently by this phenomenon, such as, for instance, Gershon, 2016, 2017, 2018; Urciuoli, 2008, 2014). How might the 'graduate' be interpreted historically as the source of a series of current cultural struggles facing individuals when they come up against the limits of management's promises? What happens when such a figure begins to populate university campuses with promises which sometimes exceed the confines of employment and labour markets?

The figure of the 'graduate' in context

As the 1990s dawned, the political, economic, technological and cultural atmosphere was marked by a sentiment of historical triumph. Liberalism had wrested history away from the 20th century's violent experiments with tyrannical utopian visions of nationalism, fascism and communism. The almost euphoric political and economic state of mind (especially in the former 'West') was strengthened, among other things, by the explosive growth of technological possibilities and their promises (through computing systems with unprecedented capabilities). One of the consequences of this combination was the rise of a range of discourses anticipating a new kind of epoch – social, cultural and economic – accompanying the renewal of liberalism. The vision of a *new economy* became central to 'Blair's (2001) "third way" and Schröder's "neue Mitte" ["new centre"], both inspired by Clinton's strategy of "triangulation"' (Mouffe, 2000: 6). They shared the vision of an *economy of knowledge* that will shape the world thereafter. This vision placed *knowledge* at the foundation of a new emancipatory promise through which *value* itself would be established and determined. This vision of value pertained not only to products and services, but also to the human subject itself (Böhme and Stehr, 1986; Castells, 2011; Drucker, 2001; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). It is in this context that increasing emphasis came to be placed on promoting tertiary education (university-based or vocational) as a key constituent of personal competence and worth in this new economy. In 2001, Tony Blair (then British Prime Minister) made clear the Labour Party's policy in this respect:

> We believe there is no greater ambition for Britain than to see a steadily rising proportion gain the huge benefits of a university education as school standards rise, meeting our goal of 50% of young adults progressing to higher education by 2010

(Blair, 2001).

Between the turn of the millennium and 2016–2017, in Britain alone the number of under-graduate and postgraduate students grew steadily from around 1.9 million to 2.5 million per year (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018b). Worldwide, from the 1990s, enrolment in tertiary education also grew at an accelerated rate. Within the first 5 years after graduating from secondary education (regardless of age), figures for enrolment in forms of higher education between 1990 and 2014 show increases from about 15% to about 38% of the population in East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa; from 18% to 43% in Latin America; from 35% to 61% in Europe and Central Asia; and from 60% to nearly 85% in North America (The World Bank, 2017). These figures show how discourses about the new knowledge economy moved beyond the level of political rhetoric. The image of a world in which the sense of personal value and of access to a decent life is increasingly somehow conditional upon some form of access to higher education has become more general and more pervasive after 1989. Promises of new possibilities could not, however, cover up feelings of personal anxiety and insecurity at the prospect of being left behind in this new economic landscape. What Brown and Hesketh (2004: 27) call the 'democratization of job insecurity' also fuelled increased attention to the indebtedness and precariousness of becoming a 'knowledge worker' as it became clearer in the past two decades (Lodovici and Semenza, 2012; Perlin, 2012; Southwood, 2011).

Employment practices in private, public and even voluntary sectors have contributed to this image. Gradually, employers segmented and separated their own labour markets so that avenues to higher level jobs (especially management positions) became dependent on individuals' higher educational achievements. The rise of the new knowledge economy began to shape a new system of job allocation for graduates. One of its more visible forms is the increase in 'graduate schemes' combining both internships integrated in various university programmes, and being leading access points to full-time managerial jobs (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Recent studies show that this pattern of employment is increasingly decisive for future graduates because 40% of job offers in highly prestigious schemes depend on preliminary internships, which in turn have become compulsory elements in some university degrees (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Paton, 2014; Shoenfelt et al., 2013). This also led to the proliferation of discourses about *employability*, a new category which frames the worth of a graduate in terms of 'knowledge', 'skills', 'traits', 'mindsets' and 'dispositions', deemed necessary or desirable to improve employment options and potential for short-term 'labour market' or long-term 'career' success. These tend to be based on what employees look for in prospective candidates (Bennett, 2013; Bridgstock, 2009; Wright, 1995), and have therefore become

key drivers for orienting higher education towards an 'employability agenda'.

But what are these 'graduate jobs'? How are they different so that a separate segment of the labour market can emerge around them? Perhaps the simplest answer to this question is that they are not 'jobs' at all. Rather, these positions are undefined from a functional point of view and tend to consist of 'tours' of various functional processes in the organisation (lasting about 3 or 4 months, within a year or two), combined with elements of formal training. These positions do not therefore have traditional job descriptions and specifications. Instead, the graduate as a *person* becomes central to the definition of such positions. The question no longer focuses on *what work has to be done* in this type of employment; rather, it is a matter of *who the incumbent person is*, and who she or he *ought to be* and *become* that structures the conception, promotion and assessment of these employment and internship schemes.

They fuelled a new wave of aspirational motifs to which figures such as Tom Peters (1997) were all too ready to give expression. In an article in *Fast Company*, Peters exhorted his readers to realise that 'in the Age of the Individual, you have to be your own brand … [I]n the new world of work', Peters argued, '[w]e are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc. To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You. It's that simple – and that hard. And that inescapable.' (Peters, 1997) This call, by no means original, reiterated for the new economy an imperative repeated throughout the 20th century (Carnegie, 1936; Lorimer, 1902; Peale, 1952) and continues through new cultural vectors (e.g. Simmons, 2014).

Among other spheres, in that of graduate employment, this discourse began to shape new kinds of recruitment and selection processes, as well as a new genre of advertising literature and promotional materials which has steadily accelerated ever since. The regular (usually annual) publication of entire volumes presenting information on what are termed 'top graduate employers' (chosen by employees) through major national and international publishing houses (the *Times Top 100 Graduate Employers, The Guardian UK 300 Graduate Employers* and *Rate My Placement Top 100 Undergraduate Employers* are some of the most prominent) aims to make them referential in the promotion of ideal images of successful graduates in multiple sectors, both private and public, in large, medium or small organisations. Beyond such publications, there has been an almost explosive growth in the production of such materials through university, corporate, professional, consultancy and coaching services, both online and in various material forms, disseminated through various mass-media channels (Gershon, 2016, 2017, 2018; Urciuoli, 2003, 2008).

The aim of this article is to examine this particular dimension of the graduate labour market – namely, the kinds of discourses outlining what it means to be a 'successful graduate', what 'graduate work' entails and what kind of direction 'life' as a 'graduate' can offer. These discourses have become increasingly

demanding with respect to the *character* they project as the ideal personality of a 'graduate'; at the same time, they have also become increasingly subtle and more widely disseminated beyond the organisations which advertise graduate programmes. An example is necessary at this point. Early in 2017, looking for a public computer in a UK business school, we came across a very simple artefact. We found five or six computers in an open 'study space' on the ground floor of the building, each with the same mouse-mat next to the keyboard: at first glance, a simple, cheaply made, standard mouse-mat, quite unremarkable. Yet the complexity of the image imprinted on it was anything but simple or standard: at the top, the logo of the supermarket chain ALDI; across the bottom ran a whole white band (far more prominent, in fact, than the corporate logo) with the university's business school logo, with details of its career services, and the message 'Hello Future'. The focus, however, is an image: the left half of the surface, a photographic portrait; in the centre, a text-box with a statement by the character in the portrait. The background is a colourful, but blurred, view of the flower section of a supermarket. The portrait is of a bright, yet anonymous, young woman, wearing a plain navy business jacket over a buttoned-up, pale blue shirt. There is nothing noteworthy in the physical presence and this is probably the intention: this is a familiar figure for students attending business school programmes. What is, however, striking is the elaborate pose and the intriguing expression of the portrait. Looking straight at us, but with the head bent slightly to the left, she bears a discrete, but knowing, smile: self-assured, yet not arrogant, this smile, however, seems to challenge the viewer. But challenge in what respect? Divided in multi-coloured segments, aiming to clarify its emphases, her explanation reads:

I'm still me, but
the most
confident,
all-conquering version of me.

It's tough. Tougher than I thought it would be.
You're taken out of your comfort zone and given
a million things to juggle. But helping to drive
one of the UK's fastest-growing supermarkets? It
feels utterly amazing.

BECAUSE I'M ALDI. AND I'M LIKE NO
OTHER.

Why would such a small and apparently indifferent object deserve attention and further consideration? What kind of clues does it contain about the ways in which a certain vocabulary and iconography is being articulated in relation to graduate managerial careers? It is important to note here that this mouse-mat is not an isolated artefact; it is part of ALDI's (2018) ongoing graduate recruitment campaign and the evolution of this character 'over a year like no other' is its central feature. Three reasons made us choose this artefact from the multitude of such materials colonising the graduate segment of the managerial labour market. First, it was the seeming insignificance of the object that caught our attention: why would two important institutional players in their sectors in Britain make such an elaborate effort to produce a mere mouse-mat as the carrier of their combined vision for the purpose of higher education? In the area in which we found it, on several tables, there were stacks of these mats to pick up and take home. Once in use, a mouse-mat becomes a close presence for the hand and for the eye, its image always available. In this respect, it resembles a similar object we collected in the early 2000s: a dark-grey coaster produced by Deloitte with the message 'It's your future – How far will you take it?' (with the web address of its graduate recruitment site, on one side, and, on the other, against the seeming background of a full moon on a starry sky, a simple sentence: 'The possibilities are endless'). Beyond their humble functions, such objects want to be taken seriously – they ask to be *noticed* and *read.*

The second reason for focusing on this mouse-mat is that it is not simply a corporate advertising gesture, but also a marker which foregrounds a trend which, over the past two decades, has become prevalent in higher education institutions in the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere in the world. The 'graduate' profile and the access to unparalleled opportunities it claims to afford have become distinctively important among the claims universities make for their 'relevance' in contemporary economic, cultural and social contexts. As scholars have noted, this tendency is already having significant qualitative consequences with respect to the purpose of higher education itself (Collini, 2012; Furedi, 2006, 2009, 2016), its very fate (Readings, 1996; Roberts, 2002), the position of students (Williams, 2013) and the role of academics (Williams, 2016). That the corporate logo on the mat is less prominent than that of the business school which has secured this alliance is, as we learnt subsequently, intentional. This campaign represents a measure of the university's institutional capacity to facilitate 'employability' (Moore, 2010; Valenzuela, 2013), a quality which, despite its ambiguity and elusiveness, has become dominant in estimations of the worth of university education as a whole. The rise of employability as a measure of the quality of universities means that higher education thus becomes a kind of 'biopolitical project' (Sørensen and Śliwa, 2016: 485) in which students occupy a complex position as indebted consumers seeking a promising, yet precarious, future place in a global labour market

(Chertkovskaya et al., 2017; Smith, 2018). In the United Kingdom, for example, this tendency has now acquired national political importance through the steady implementation of government schemes and criteria by which universities' teaching quality (Teaching Excellence Framework, 'TEF') is measured against the employment destination of their graduates within 6 months of graduating. As a key performance indicator for TEF, 'employability skills' now must somehow be embedded in the curriculum (Cole and Tibby, 2013; Graham, 2017; Jackson, 2013) in all disciplines. Recent government papers go as far as anticipating and emphasising the collection of data regarding employability even at the level of individual courses and modules (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018a).

What does 'employability' refer to? Or, perhaps, *who* does employability refer to? These questions bring us to the third and perhaps most substantial reason why we invoke the ALDI mouse-mat here. The rise of the 'graduate' as a specific figure in contemporary labour market cultures is, we would argue, both a novelty in certain ways, but also a reiteration of a deeper and longer trend in the political landscape of liberalism and neoliberalism. The text on the mouse-mat deserves, in this respect, further investigation. Written in the first-person, it seeks to speak with the voice of the individual idealised by neoliberalism: the one who seeks to live a 'worthwhile', 'legitimate' and 'authentic' life (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Fleming, 2009) by devoting herself to self-discovery and empowerment through work. 'Careers' have become, as Grey (1994) argued, more than mere forms of employment. As 'projects of the self', the emphasis falls very much on the capacity of individuals to engage 'selfhood' as a whole in the 'adventure' of work. The figure of the graduate that speaks to her viewer from the ALDI mat makes precisely this point: corporate work has not deprived 'me' of my 'selfhood', rather, it has empowered my 'self' to fulfil its own nature and its possibilities. Having the opportunity of employment at ALDI, as a student and graduate of a notable business school, presents the prospect of achieving the expression of my 'self' to a level even 'I', the incumbent, could not anticipate. By 'Becoming ALDI', 'I' can claim that uniqueness which gives direction and meaning to 'my' personal existence: this is a powerful promise made, through a simple mouse-mat, in the name of what becoming a successful graduate might entail. In 1979, both Michel Foucault (2008) in France and Christopher Lasch (1979) in the United States offered complex analyses of the historical roots of this character throughout the 20th century. Just as political thinking and practices in the United Kingdom and United States were to demonstrate through the 1980s, Foucault (2008) argued that:

> In neo-liberalism – and it does not hide this; it proclaims it – there is also a theory of *homo oeconomicus*, but he is not at all a partner of exchange. *Homo oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo*

oeconomicus as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings. […] [T]here is a complete change in the conception of this *homo oeconomicus.* (p. 226)

Foucault's interpretation of the neoliberal version of subjectivity (with its narcissistic overtone) is important for our argument because it explains the nuance of ALDI's mouse-mat: using only the first-person pronoun, the text does not propose a simple, mechanical, exchange of labour for a wage between two economic actors. Rather, it announces something else, something internal to the subject who works: a journey of self-discovery whose end-result, lying beyond mere material gains, is the production of a fuller, more empowered, self. We tried to understand therefore why this mouse-mat was such an elaborate, and indeed very intelligent, gesture. The level of thought and sophistication that went into its composition is far from negligible. We learnt from the career services involved that the process of its elaboration was itself conducted through student focus groups and that the text had been chosen by students themselves. It became clear that we were gazing upon an object which might, in future time, be rediscovered as a cultural–historical artefact worthy of careful interpretation in the attempt to understand the society and culture that produced it. For us, the task is to investigate further how this particular figure of the 'graduate' emerges, and what cultural conditions make possible the strong expressions associated with this position. On one hand, artefacts such as ALDI's mouse-mat or Deloitte's coaster are novel; on the other, as Foucault and others indicate, the roots of this cultural novelty draw their sustenance from a longer historical process whose nature, continuities and discontinuities require investigation from varied perspectives.

The rise of a narcissistic type of *homo oeconomicus*, described by Foucault and Lasch in 1979, was taken up again by Paul Heelas (2002), who used the category of 'ethics of self-work' (p. 80) to outline its cultural substance. In turn, he derived it from Stephen Tipton's (1984) interpretation of 'styles of ethical evaluation' arising in the 1960s (pp. 282–6). In this light, Heelas shows, individuals appear as self-reliant entities – performative, mobile, ambidextrous and adaptable – responsible for their own performance at work, whether through an 'intra-prising' spirit within an organisation, as self-employed 'entrepreneurial' agents or as job-seekers. The framework for the ideal character of the 'graduate' is also articulated in this register, but the roots of this vision of selfhood and its fulfilment are, paradoxically, to be found not in the corporate domain as such. Some of the earliest formulations appear in student initiatives of the 1960s which called for resistance to, and reform of, conformist modes of life. One such instance is a core cultural and political claim which appears in the famous *Port Huron Statement*, published in August 1962 by the largest and most influential radical student organisation of the 1960s in the United States,

the *Students for a Democratic Society* (SDS). In the section entitled *Values*, we find the articulation of a conception of humanity emancipated from the conformist demands of post-war American capitalism:

> We regard *Man* [sic] as infinitely precious and infinitely perfectible. … Men have infinite potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image of popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic; a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness, nor one which unthinkingly adopts status values, nor one which represses all threats to its habits, but one which has full, spontaneous access to present and past experiences, one which easily unites the fragmented parts of personal history, one which openly faces problems which are troubling and unresolved; one with an intuitive awareness of possibilities, an active sense of curiosity, and ability and willingness to learn. (Students for a Democratic Society, 1962)

Table 1. Table detailing the correlation between ideal-typical work ethics (Heelas, 2002) and various accounts of generational demographics (see, for instance Howe and Strauss, 1991; Johnson and Johnson, 2010; Zemke et al., 1999).

Chronological sequence/correlation				
Work Ethics (Heelas, 2002)	Tradition-informed Work ethic (1517 …)	Organisational work ethic (1950s …)	Instrumentalised work ethic (1980s …)	Self-work ethic (1990s ...)
Generational demographic (Howe and Strauss, 1991)	'Traditionalist' (1922–1945)	'Baby boomers' (1946–1964)	'Generation X' (1965–1980)	Millennials/'Generation Y' (1980–2000s ...)

What is interesting about this statement (as a metaphysical declaration) is how, from the 1990s onward, conceptual structures which began to outline the ideal character of the graduate have, with almost uncanny ability, assimilated the premises asserted in the first two sentences of this passage. Using them as a basis to address aspiring graduates, we can see (as ALDI's example shows, among many) how the main tropes about graduates today channel and amplify such messages about the self-assertive and self-expressive subjectivity required by a graduate managerial career. What once issued from the critical instinct of opposition to conformity has been meanwhile subtly subverted and 'conquered', as Frank (1998) argued, by the corporate establishment.

Appropriated by the broader discourses of enterprise and personal success, the theme of 'employability' now places on each individual a kind of continuous entrepreneurial burden 'to constantly develop and assert themselves as, and to remain, employable' (Chertkovskaya et al., 2013: 703) in order to survive in increasingly precarious job markets (Southwood, 2011). The entrepreneurial subjectivity constructed in this way marks a historical contrast with traditional conformist requirements of early to mid-20th century 'organisation man' (Whyte, 1956), and a turn away from the culture of bureaucratic regimes described by Weber (1978) in the 19th. From the middle of the 20th century onwards, this entrepreneurial conception of a self-producing individuality begins to emerge in what Foucault and others interpret as the novelty of *neo*liberalism (Bröckling, 2015; Fleming, 2009; Grey and Garsten, 2001; Lasch, 1979, 1984; McCabe, 2009; Miller and Rose, 1990; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2009; Riesman, 1950; Riesman and Glazer, 1952; Roberts et al., 2009; Rose, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Slobodian, 2018). For instance, as Table 1 tries to capture, a certain understanding (such as Heelas's) of the chronological succession of work ethics appears to correspond to the articulation of generational demographics in the workplace (Johnson and Johnson, 2010; Zemke et al., 1999).

On the other hand, generational studies focus more on the typical traits, skills, technologies and features of generations born in specific periods, and therefore exposed to certain world events (Davis, 2004; Eyerman and Turner, 1998; Ryder, 1985), rather than focusing on the general ethos of contemporary work and employee engagement. Work ethics and generational traits are important reference points in a historical consideration of individuals' relation to work and work organisations. As we will show below, it is important to consider them with respect to what we term the 'graduate character', through further conceptual analysis and development.

David Riesman and the question of character

Our argument is that the 'graduate' appears as a constructed *character* – in other words, as a set of attributes which, synthesised in an individual person, become the unit to which the conceptual apparatus of contemporary employability, for

instance, is addressed. Among the core contributions of literary sources is the study of *individual character*, its *formation* and *evolution*, as a sign of the broader dynamics of societies and cultures. Our suggestion is that literary works focused on the evolution of individual characters allow us to 'read' them as indications of ideas, values and themes central to the age they reflect. The question of *character* has also been a core theme in cultural sociology, particularly in America in the decades following 1945. David Riesman's analysis of post-war social identity in the United States offers a far-sighted account describing the trajectory of the changing nature of cultural character. Published in 1950 under the inspired title *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*, it turns out to be (still) the best-selling sociology text of all times (Gans, 1997). Anticipating the rise of what he called 'the other-directed type', he showed that his analysis pertained not just to an 'America' understood geographically, but to a globally expanding American 'culture': 'My analysis of the other-directed character is thus at once an analysis of the American and of contemporary man. Much of the time I find it hard or impossible to say where one ends and the other begins' (Riesman, 1950: 19).

   The Lonely Crowd has been somewhat forgotten in the past two or three decades, even though its insights are – especially in an age like ours, suffused with the imperatives of performativity – perhaps more acute now than at the time of its publication. With more than six decades of hindsight, it might be easier to grasp why Riesman's main argument was, and remains, so compelling. The book is multifaceted, providing rich empirical observations of American social life in nearly all its dimensions. Its central problem was the connection between personal character and its broader social context, under the influence of the school of cultural anthropology, especially of its leading figures, Margaret Mead (2000 [1942]) and Ruth Benedict (1967 [1944]). The central thesis of the book will allow us to contextualise the central character in Charles Webb's *The Graduate* and his evolution.

   Written in the late 1940s, *The Lonely Crowd*, and its companion volume, *Faces in the Crowd* (Riesman and Glazer, 1952), stood in stark opposition to the many voices who were predicting another period of economic decline following the war. To the contrary, Riesman argued that the central economic consequence of the two world wars on America was to place it at the centre of a new global arrangement – and not just as one among the victorious powers, but as *the only* victorious power that could benefit at a societal level from the productive explosion generated by world wars. As it turned out, Riesman's hypothesis was confirmed by history – and it was with this anticipation in mind that he asked the question that was to mark his entire work: *what kind of character will be forged in a society of abundance, rather than of scarcity?* No less important, however, was the corollary: what kind of sociality will arise from the sensibilities of 'the changing American character'? In order to think through these questions,

Riesman tried to understand how social bonds are transformed when,

> [m]ost people in America today – the 'overprivileged' two thirds, let us say, as against the underprivileged third – can afford to attend to, and allow their characters to be shaped by, situational differences of a subtler nature than those arising from bare economic necessity and their relations to the means of production. (Riesman, 1950: 249)

'Abundance', in Riesman's (1964) sense (pp. 300–9), was to have the paradoxical effect of hollowing out a key dimension of individual existence through the emerging social bonds of post-war America. He identified a kind of cultural and social loss of purpose that had ordered life hitherto. He explained his hypothesis using a triple typology of character: 'tradition-directed', 'inner-directed', and 'other-directed' (Riesman, 1950: 3–31). Through this, he anticipated post-war booming America as the stage of a 'characterological struggle' (Riesman, 1950: 7) between the latter two, and it is in the middle of this struggle that Benjamin Braddock's narrative in *The Graduate* can be both contextualised and conceptualised.

On one hand, the 'inner-directed' is the social type corresponding to the long period of industrial globalisation that began in earnest in 1815, with the Congress of Vienna. Individual character in Europe and North America was being shaped by a process of social and economic expansion which Riesman (1950) called 'high growth potential' (p. 7). 'Inner-directed', in Riesman's view, is the character for whom accumulation and the potential of wealth, as well as the need for its prudential protection, appear with such force that its pursuit becomes the reference for existence. Outward industrial expansion corresponds to a new inner cultural horizon opened up by the gradual secularisation of the North-Atlantic West, especially by the erosion of strict religious social conformity (a defining feature of the 'tradition-directed' type). This new sense of individuality was borne out of a new sentiment of internal freedom: namely, an individual would, in this new world of accumulation, have to decide on how to direct personal life *outside and beyond* prior traditional determinations (especially extended family and church). Work, in the manner provided by rapidly growing industrial production at the end of the 19th and the first part of the 20th centuries, required self-direction amid the new structures of modern, anonymous, often anomic, urban industrial spaces, which seemed to offer at the same time so much unprecedented promise of access to wealth. Riesman's argument resonates with Heelas historical account of various work ethics presented above:

Table 2. Table detailing the overlap between ideal typical work ethics, generational demographics and characterological typology.

	Chronological sequence/correlation			
Work Ethics (Heelas, 2002)	Tradition-informed Work Ethic (1517 …)	Organisational work ethic (1950s …)	Instrumentalised work ethic (1980s …)	Self-work ethic (1990s ...)
Generational Demographic (Howe and Strauss, 1991)	'Traditionalist' (1922–1945)	'Baby boomers' (1946–1964)	'Generation X' (1965–1980)	Millennials/'Generation Y' (1980 – 2000s …)
Characterological structure (Riesman, 1950)	Tradition-directed	Inner-directed	Other-directed	

As with the ideal-typical work ethics articulated by Heelas (2002), the 'inner-directed' type was not a unifying term, but was carefully used by Riesman to explain an orientation of character that traversed various modes of life and levels of the social hierarchy. For him, the historical success of world industrialisation in the 19th and the early part of the 20th century was not going to be reversed by the Second World War. On the contrary, Riesman (as much as Arendt, 1946) understood that even world wars had been borne out of the rapid expansion of modern industrial empires controlled by outdated and incoherent imperial political structures. He asked: what forms of cultural sensibility and modes of social orientation will emerge when history shifts 'from an age of production to an age of consumption' (Riesman, 1950: 6)? And he turned here, in an inspired move, to the challenge set by de Tocqueville in the 1830s for whom the 'American' already bore the signs of 'a new kind of man: … The American is said to be shallower, freer with his money, friendlier, more uncertain of himself and his values, more demanding of approval than the European' (Riesman, 1950: 19). Riesman calls this type 'other-directed', and shows that a society of abundance reaches a turning point from growth to decline, cultural decline to be precise. He means that what is to be expected is a decline of the 'soul' to the extent that the *freedom from* having to produce and secure one's own existence every day, and therefore having to align life to 'production', is replaced by a new and disorienting freedom to consume in order to become socially validated. What arises is a new kind of insecurity, not economic, but cultural and existential, generated by the lack of a compelling answer to the question, 'what is *freedom for*?':

> The society of incipient decline develops in its typical members a social character whose conformity is insured by their tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others. These I shall term *other-directed* people and the society in which they live one *dependent on other-direction*. (Riesman, 1950: 8)

For Riesman (1950), this is the central type of the coming stage of modernity: the one 'who in his character is more capable of and more interested in maintaining responsive contact with others both at work and at play' (p. 23). Having lost the sense of direction inherent in the social bonds of the past, the newly emancipated type is in fact not richer in freedom, but just as anxious as all that went before. The new anxiety is not for survival

in its basic form, but for increasingly subtle modalities that might secure increased performative recognition for the individual. For Riesman, the inner as well as the outer spaces of self-direction have become empty, and are in need of continuous reinforcement. The thesis underpinning Riesman's work (which in turn underpins our interpretation of what *The Graduate* represents in cultural–historical terms) is that, in a world in which there is no other prevailing bond for social cohesion than the sense of the *individualised* and *individualistic self*, guidance, orientation and *valuation* itself cannot come from any other source than the encounter among countless, 'lonely', *selves*.

Riesman pointed out how perilous life becomes when traditional forms of direction or grounding are lacking, when individual life is so 'freed up' that it loses any other frame of reference than the 'self'. Yet, his warning can perhaps be more easily understood now: as the sense of endless possibility bound up with this new-found freedom became taken for granted, all forms of 'directive authority' are entitled – and indeed expected – to step in and make various promises. Whereas Webb's character showed in the 1960s a disoriented and empty Benjamin Braddock, the graduates of the 21st century are – like ALDI's character – continuously pursued by images of successful, perfect, accomplished versions of themselves. These implied 'best versions' of themselves stare back at them from the shiny screens and posters lining university halls and employability literature. In this sense, we interpret Riesman's work as a perceptive warning against the dangers attending the promises of 'abundance'. We will show – through the analysis of the novel – that the temptation of this promise, particularly in the form in which it has been co-opted by the tropes of contemporary graduate labour markets, is proving too authoritative to resist. Before doing so, we will outline how this comparison will be undertaken.

Character in literature and imagery

Our attempt to trace features of the 'graduate' as a cultural character in time relies partly on a comparison between a literary source of the 1960s, and a very different genre expressing the same figure five decades later: the complex imagery and texts produced by the managerial literature that has inundated the graduate labour market in the past two decades. However, to clarify the argument of this analysis, in this section we will elucidate how we compare these two different kinds of empirical sources. The relationship

between texts, images and icons has been a classical theme for debates in philosophy, theology, religious and cultural history in various cultures and epochs. In the 20th century, these debates have been rekindled and renewed with an emphasis on the sheer proliferation of image production, the novelty of the means by which images are produced, and their specific entanglement in everyday life through screens of all kinds. This is the most recent iteration of the novel connection between images and modernity's central theme and grounding value: worldly human self-assertion in the wake of the 'death of god'. This historical turn in our relationship with images stimulated outstanding contributions, from various thinkers such as Erwin Panofsky, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Jean Baudrillard, as well as John Berger, Judith Williamson, W. J. T. Mitchell, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leuwen or Niklas Luhmann.

Our aim is to examine the central character of a novel with the particular intention to understand its historical significance as an iteration of the origins of the 'graduate' as a cultural 'icon', rather than estimate its intrinsic literary value. Deciphering elements of its origin is part of understanding this figure's complex subsequent evolution. It is especially important to grasp the assimilation of the 'graduate', as a character, in the current dramatic language that surrounds it in the market of graduate managerial careers. This is expressed in the multifaceted, intertextual and multimodal world of promotional materials of all kinds targeting students today. How can the two genres be compared when they are, at first sight, such different surfaces and forms of expression? On certain levels, these are very different kinds of sources; on some other levels, however, the story of the graduate told by Webb and that told by managerialism share some common ground, in both form and substance. Formally, both are genres of fiction, yet both stake significant claims to a deep connection to 'reality'. Webb's is, of course, a work of literary fiction but one that allows access to historical realities in a specific way: its central preoccupation is the material, cultural, social and moral detail of the ordinary life of an ordinary character, rather than the destiny of a mythical or transhistorical figure. Similarly, like all modern fiction, promotional materials have a particular relationship to the 'real' and to 'truth': Luhmann once remarked, 'After truth comes advertising', yet, Barthes (1977) explained this relation by arguing that,

… in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the

signifieds of the   advertising message are formed *a priori* by certain attributes of the product and these signifieds have to   be transmitted as clearly as possible. If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these   signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is *frank*, or at least   emphatic. (p. 33)

Both genres – textual and imagistic – used in this argument share this common ground: they both intend to communicate the features of their central character – the 'graduate' – through both word and image. What are at first seemingly divergent genres – text and image, from different times and contexts – are also correlative, as expressions of a particular historically situated, conception of the graduate. Both genres aim to convey, albeit by different means of expression, a certain *economy* of the graduate character. By *economy* we understand how a certain plan – or programme – for a finite individual existence has to be configured when this concrete individual comes under the exhortation of social and cultural ideals which always exceed concrete possibilities for their realisation. What the 'graduate' position now increasingly expresses is a new kind of idealised career under the pressure to actualise one's purported endless personal possibilities or potentialities. Both the novel and the example of ALDI's mouse-mat have in common the exploration – and in the case of the latter, the 'programming' – of the character of the graduate in terms of its direction through career and life. As we will show, whereas Webb's character is disoriented and unable to choose a direction as a 'graduate', the graduate of today can no longer claim disorientation in the same way. For current students, there is no shortage of references for how a graduate *ought to be 'a graduate'* and what being a graduate *ought to mean* as a platform towards a fully realised existence.

Charles Webb's *The Graduate* (1963): an early literary source

The story told by Webb has a recognisable structure in which the protagonist's coming of age is bound up, among other aspects, with the recognition that entering independent adult life is far from a clean break with parental authority. Webb's narrative is in fact centred on the realisation that the world of adulthood does not provide a straightforward licence to choose a destiny according to one's will. Rebelling against the bonds and values borne by his mainstream cultural inheritance, represented by the affluence of his father and his father's friends and associates, turns out to be the source of a

confused and, eventually, vacuous summer after graduation. This is the register in which Webb offers an effective satirical critique of the staleness of a social milieu in which the accumulation of wealth and its performative display appear as the only predicates of life. The novel's success, however, would have been much less evident without Mike Nichols' 1967 screen adaptation. The movie gave the text its iconic status (Harris, 2009: 27) and became one of the top-grossing films of all time. In recent analyses of the book and its screen adaptation (Gray, 2017; Whitehead, 2010), the authors explain their ongoing relevance because the narrative's historical context seems blurred, its outline ambiguous and the descriptions of the protagonists rather limited. In 2010, Whitehead (2010) argued that, '… [w]hile film historians generally discuss the film in the context of the anti-establishment, counter-cultural film documents of the era, *The Graduate* provides almost no period detail, let alone political or cultural reference points' (p. 17). Gray (2017) too emphasises how the novel 'never provides the slightest physical description of Benjamin Braddock' (pp. 3–4), and that, therefore, the reader comes to know Ben 'solely through his words and deeds'.

The question which arises, then, is how are we to interpret Webb's choice of title, when, half a century later, the figure he focuses on has become so visible in the images of graduate labour markets? The answer requires an interpretation of *The Graduate* as if it were a cultural artefact, an archaeological find, belonging to a specific historical context, despite offering little explicit references to it. Indeed, when analysing the novel together with the film, it becomes clear that Webb was trying to understand both the personal trajectory of his protagonist, and the limits of the values of middle-class America with its instinctive conformism in the first decades after the Second World War. As Gray (2017) points out, the focus of the novel is 'entirely on Webb's probing of intergenerational tension', while Webb himself qualified this focus by noting that 'his work was a characterological study and not a generational attack' (p. 6).

In his attempt to position his novel as a characterological study, Webb's choice of title aligns – with considerable care and foresight – the position of his main character to a specific context. Ben ('*The Graduate*') is at once an individual figure, as well as a complex social and cultural phenomenon situated in a broader historical landscape. Yet, the vague descriptions of people and places, together with the deadpan dialogues that make up much of the novel, allow the predicament of the young protagonist to emerge,

albeit indirectly, in a light which captures, first, the specific cultural transition that marked the 1960s, as well as, second, the more general tension that characterises the subject position of graduates ever since. The market for managerial jobs has itself now taken up the role of naming the ways in which graduates ought to feel and act in relation to their own future. Thus, the novel and the film became reference points for youthful discontent in the decades that have passed since the book and the film's first release:

> Webb's novel remains surprisingly vague about what's eating this very privileged young man. This vagueness has turned out to be an unlikely advantage: In both book and film, the root source of Benjamin Braddock's discontent remains so elusive that whole generations swear *The Graduate* reflects their personal tale of woe. (Gray, 2017: 5–6)

Our argument therefore seeks to show how the word *graduate* functions as a category in Webb's text, as well as how it has become such a rich trope in graduate market discourse half a century later. In this respect, Riesman's characterological scheme is an analytic device that helps in this respect. Not only because Riesman's own text belongs chronologically to the same historical era, but also because he anticipated the logic and dynamic of social characters that straddle the transition from a (long) historical period of certainty about the immediacy of the demands of life, to one of 'abundance' in which Riesman saw the dissolution of those certainties and the beginning of a new kind of disorientation generated precisely by abundance itself, both material and social. When Riesman (1964) asked the question, 'Abundance for What?', he was pointing out the paradoxical effect that an abundance of opportunities, together with an atmosphere of relative certainty and peace, will generate: instead of clarity of purpose, there arises indecision, lack of direction and a new kind of middle-class anxiety. Although the film is often seen as a sexually charged romantic comedy of errors, rather than a sharp satire, Dustin Hoffman (who played Ben in the film) explained in an interview that such a superficial view misses something very important:

> The generation that considered Ben an icon were coming from a time after the depression … it took twenty years for America to pull itself out. Not only could it afford to be material but more than at any other time in the 20th Century to consider material things golden. Material things suddenly took the place of love.

'I got my kid a new car … I got my kid a …' and Mr. Robinson does this. As Mr. Robinson, he gives me [i.e., the character of Ben] this, he gives me that, it was a substitute for love. And *this is the time we are still living through*. Having money meant leaving the kids, you could go away and leave the kids, you could give them this, you could give them a nanny … *money was used in a way to obliterate the family structure. The kids were aware of it and the kids resented it* and your children were no longer your children; your children were not different to a new car that you could say 'he's at Harvard now' and you could put them through school. I remember my father saying to me when I didn't want to play the piano anymore, 'Do you have any idea how much *money we invested into you* since you first started taking lessons?' … I don't think my dad was unique, my dad came from the American *experience* … and *he propagated what he learned and I think that was a part of that whole generation*.' (Anon, 2011)

It is important to note that despite sparse explicit reference to historical detail, Webb's novel places its characters in its particular historical moment. Therefore, it is also important to emphasise that the novel functions both in space (in the social space of the privileged middle-class), and in time (a change of generations marked by a significant social transformation as well). Webb's depiction of Ben reveals the first contradictory position opened up by each new generation of graduates. Riesman had already pointed out, in cultural–historical terms, what Hoffman articulated above, namely that the novel is set at the time of a specific shift in the values of one generation of middle-class America to the next (see Table 2). Riesman explained this further in the following reflection on the decade after the first publication of *The Lonely Crowd*:

… the American is still, as in Colonial times, oriented to performance and achievement, not to hedonism and consummatory pleasures. What appears superficially as change … is the altered situation in which these drives manifest themselves. The home no longer is the seat of a family firm engaged in producing agricultural commodities or in running a small business. It is, rather, engaged in the 'production' of children who must be trained and encouraged to take their places in the demanding professional and managerial system; and the parents must seek to succeed in this more intangible realm as they might once have sought to show a profit, to increase the crease, or to build up an inheritance for their children. (Riesman and Glazer, 1961: 429–430)

In this context, Ben's attempt to understand what is happening to him is explored through the novel's dialogues – and confrontations – between him and his parents, particularly his father (Mr Braddock):

> Ben's probing question to another generation unable to understand them, his disillusionment with a society seemingly incapable of explaining its most honoured values, his strongly urgent affair with an older woman and its unexpected outcome, will produce in some a response of anger, in others a smile of understanding and sympathy. (Gray, 2017: 7)

The paradox Ben is ultimately facing is whether the individual path he has taken – and now has to make 'definitive' – is truly 'his own': did he go to university because he wanted to, or because it was the normal expectation of his social position? Is life as a graduate going to be an unfolding and affirmation of his true 'self', or its denial by the mainstream values and goals to which his university degree inherently binds him? The dialogues through which Ben attempts to work through these personal questions surpass the confines of his 'case'; they are, as Gray showed (cited above), just as valid for subsequent generations because *The Graduate* is an examination of the perennial situation of an individual trying to figure out whether life is one of individual freedom and agency, or of conformity and imitation.

The plot unfolds over the summer following his graduation from 'a small Eastern college on a day in June' (Webb, 1981: 5), with Ben caught between two conflicting imperatives, both expressed by his father. On one hand, he tells Ben to enjoy his summer – as if it was the first and last when he will be free from serious concerns – while, on the other, he tells him to consider seriously his options and decide his future. This is not framed simply as advice from father to son, but as counsel from one generation to another. Indeed, rather ironically, Mr Braddock's business partner and best friend of 17 years, Mr Robinson (with whose wife Ben will have an affair) takes Ben aside to tell him the following:

> You'll never be young again, Ben … And I think maybe – I think maybe you're a little too worried about things right now … I think you ought to be taking it a little easier right now than you seem to … Sow some wild oats … Take things as they come. Have a good time with the girls and so forth … Before you know it you'll find a nice girl and settle down and have a damn fine life'. (Webb, 1981:

26–7)

As Riesman explained, for characters like Ben's father, Mr Robinson and other men of their generation, there was no uncertainty of purpose. In Riesman's (1964) view of the generation, which was also his own,

> Most aspirations pursued by our class, and by classes of the same era at Princeton, Yale, Dartmouth, and other colleges, were more conventional: to make much money, to rise high in the government, to become a doctor, lawyer, merchant or chief. (p. 311)

As the narrative progresses, it becomes clearer that the longer Ben postpones his decision, the more he is in danger of failing to take up the opportunities afforded by his status. In the first instance of this ongoing sense of generational confrontation and questioning, Ben voices the existential concerns that will dictate his actions for the course of the novel, and, also for the first time, the reader is made aware that the root of Ben's disillusionment lies precisely in him having graduated. To make this explicit, Webb uses the parents' voices to express Ben's inner struggle to account to himself and to others for his choices. The father is the key figure who makes this entire line of questioning simple. Mr. Braddock asks, simply, 'Why?' when he sees Ben drifting around. This question is repeatedly exchanged between the two and, as Ben spends more and more of his summer drifting and dithering, we see it asked again with a new emphasis. 'Have you just lost hope?', asks Mr. Braddock (Webb, 1981: 65). The exchange that ensues touches the core of Ben's predicament and that of his generation. Trying to avoid the conversation, Ben replies:

> 'Dad, we've got nothing to say to each
> other'.
> 'But we've got to, Ben'.
> 'We don't'.
> 'Ben I – I want to talk about values. Something'.
> 'You want to talk about values', Benjamin said.
> 'Do you have any left?'
> Benjamin frowned. 'Do I have any values', he said. 'Values. Values'. He shook
> his head. 'I can't think of any at the moment. No.' (Webb, 1981; 66)

This exchange captures the logic of Ben's struggle. On one hand, the father is what Riesman, (1950) describes as the 'inner-directed' character certain of his life's sense and manner of development (p. 15). Highly individualised, mobile, yet self-certain of his values, Ben's father cannot grasp what unsettles Ben so deeply: 'Would you mind telling me then what those four years of college, what was the point of all that hard work?', to which Ben absently replies, 'You got me' (Nichols, 2001). For Mr Braddock, the relationships between university education, the achievement that comes with the hard work of study and the legitimate expectation that such an investment ought to derive its benefits, is clear and resonates with the anecdote provided by Dustin Hoffman about his own father framing his piano lessons as an 'investment'. In turn, Ben's ambiguous answer marks the subtle shift from one generation to another: while a generation ago, the question did not even arise, because the answer was always given and internalised, for Ben it is utterly confounding. He cannot say (even to himself) *why* he is acting, and feeling, the way he is. Because the question is unanswerable for either of the two characters, albeit for fundamentally different reasons, its importance becomes even clearer. Their failure to make sense of the situation leaves them both with a dilemma that acquires its proper magnitude in the overall structure of the plot. This dilemma will recur and dictate the course of Ben's summer. For him, the inability to answer the question 'why' is the reason for which he chooses to withdraw from his family and friends. Asked later by Mr. Robinson about his plans, Ben replies 'Indefinite' (Webb, 1981: 70). Thus, the entire set of dialogues between Ben and his parents' generation is woven around the central intention of Webb's story: all Ben's predicaments are derived from his position as a 'graduate'.

'Ben' is not simply a character, or a generational archetype, but also an index of a moment in social and cultural history when the self-certainties of middle-class 'America' are thrown into doubt. The father's convictions become the son's doubts and even obstacles to living his own life. This is what Riesman tried to capture through the 'other-directed character': the loss of firm references and directions, the 'corrosion of character', as Richard Sennett (1998) (himself one of Riesman's students in the 1960s) framed it more than three decades later in his own analysis of father and son. Ben can thus be understood as a marker for that moment when a set of values that appeared incontrovertible no longer performs its cultural function: there

are no answers forthcoming, but there is no alternative either. Five decades later, at the moment of graduation when Ben is insecure and uncertain, ALDI's graduate trainee is precisely the opposite. The vocabulary and imagery of graduate schemes stepped into this moment of emptiness: ALDI's mouse-mat's assemblage of object, image of successful subjectivity and institutional context bestows upon their contemporary character the countenance of the imperious, commanding *I*, the ultimate expression of pure individuality, which is far from disoriented or lost. Ben's unease and worry about his future emerges today in the domain of graduate jobs and employability not as unease, but as promise. For Ben, contemplating the very question of the future meant contemplating a path *away from* business, however strange and dangerous it seemed. Today, graduate career discourses make a 'life in business' appear as the very platform on which the decisive personal questions can and ought to be expressed. The liberation of feeling which has marked the 'turn to the self and to life' has been itself reframed (as Heelas (2002) has shown) so that personal anxieties now appear as moments of promise and opportunity, rather than threat. Asking questions whose proportions now touch a certain kind of existential dimension in relation to being a 'graduate', recruiters mobilise a rhetoric that encourages individuals (who are actually facing the same concerns as Ben) to think that it is precisely in the world opened up by a graduate career that the question of direction in life will be decided.

These are the reasons why *The Graduate* is significant in an attempt to understand the emergence of a cultural space into which images of character promoted through graduate managerial careers have proliferated. Ben's predicament as a graduate is today framed as a challenge for which management becomes the opportunity for resolution. The ALDI example is but one instance which shows just how compelling graduate careers literature has become as one of the sources from which promises of self-assertion are framed today because empowerment and, through it, the perfection of one's self appear as offers hard to ignore and often too tempting to resist. It is important to note here that Benjamin Braddock cannot be read mechanically as the direct precursor of the ALDI graduate management trainee. In fact, Benjamin's resistance to social pressures is an attempt to remain 'normal', as it were, to chart a life course that is not defined by his academic or economic success. What Webb manages to depict, through Benjamin's dialogues with other characters, is the emptying out of

references and directions that comes along with promises of excessive possibilities. This juncture, this point of transition, from what Riesman (1950) called 'inner-direction' to 'a society dependent on other-direction' (p. 8) is what a re-reading of *The Graduate* can reveal today. The book and the film can be seen as pieces of a historical record that explains both Webb's insight in choosing his title at a time when the graduate was not present in the collective imagination in the way it is today, as well as how they can be understood now, when the cultural space of the graduate character has been reoccupied by tropes of employability and direction rooted in the discourses of management and the new economy.

Ben's predicament occurs in the context of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, when his generation became increasingly aware and vocal about its claims to new horizons of self-affirmation. As is evident in the Port Huron Statement, the first steps towards the creation of a platform of promises that previous generations could not even countenance were taken precisely by those in Ben's position, who gave initial expression to themes now used to define and outline the ideal graduate character. A cultural–historical examination of the graduate through the prism of its literary representation in the 1960s allows us to see how such an appropriation could take place: if the students' movement could state that 'We regard *Man* [sic] as infinitely precious and infinitely perfectible', and as having 'infinite potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity' in the early 1960s, the reiteration of the same motifs in the graduate careers literature since the 1990s is a notable instance which shows how powerful a cultural vector the discursive apparatus of employability has become.

Concluding remarks

How can the rise of a character capable of aspiring to (and in ALDI's case, claiming to have reached) such near-perfect qualities and prospects be understood? In this article, we suggest an additional line of inquiry alongside current preoccupations with the problematic character of the 'graduate' and its appropriation by specific kinds of labour market vocabularies. The aim here has been to foreground some elements of its cultural history. While Webb's novel is very well known as a literary and cinematic work, its social-critical intuition and insight are perhaps more visible now, with the hindsight of the past two or three decades. Webb understood that the 'graduate' is not simply a by-product of a linear social-

historical process, but rather a complex social position in which, as Riesman had already shown, a core cultural phenomenon of the second half of the 20th century could be anticipated and read. Riesman's view that the decades after 1945 were going to be characterised by unprecedented accumulation and by a shift from production to consumption, formed the basis of his analysis of an emerging performative character whose grounding in social life could only be based on continuous performances.

The Graduate can be interpreted as an early attempt to think through the struggle accompanying the formation of such a social space in which the sentiment and promises of abundant possibilities become imperative: the graduate has to rise and measure up to these promises, perform, or 'fail' by remaining simply average, normal, unremarkable. Our argument is that the idealisation of the 'graduate' through management recruitment schemes offers a subtle way of closing off the questions that shape personal existence: questions of meaning and direction. The character that now looks over every student's shoulder, seems to be checking everyone's 'progress' along a predetermined, 'positive' path of personal development mediated by higher education, towards graduate employment. Among the main effects of this strange ideal is the inhibition of the central instinct of higher education, that is, the questioning of limits and tensions characterising fundamental cultural values and promises, and allowing this questioning itself to guide an individual's existence. In the name of liberating individuality for self-expression, the 'graduate' has grown into an effective means of sterilising even higher education's main formative function around a narrow, paradoxically stunted and fragile figure. To become a 'graduate' thus appears to carry more profound cultural connotations than the immediate surface of employment or career, and its roots seem to lie deeper than in a passing fad or fashion, as it emerges at various stages of individual and family lives, in educational institutions, and in seeking to influence personal aspirations and decisions.

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