



Class, Individualisation and Perceived (Dis)advantages: Not Either/Or but Both/And?

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Abstract

One of the core contentions of the individualisation thesis is that the residents of contemporary Western nations are no longer willing or able to perceive the motors of their life paths as external, social forces such as 'class' or material resources and instead talk of internal, personal facets and motivations. This paper, grounded in a Bourdieusian understanding of class, engages with this prominent assertion through analysis of 55 life-history interviews with people from a mix of class positions. It reveals that though individualistic sentiments are present, the respondents were all too ready to cite various forms of capital as advantages or disadvantages as well, though the degree to which they were seen as 'external' or 'individualised' differed by class. Furthermore, when 'class' was brought explicitly into the frame it was generally seen as a playing a fundamental role in life's trajectory, but mainly through issues of interaction and (mis)recognition rather than deprivation and inequality. Insofar as individualistic schemes of perception and class thus intertwine these processes could be said to represent what Beck refers to as a 'both/and' situation, but since they are neither particularly new nor damaging to class analysis the individualisation thesis is put in doubt.

Keywords: *Bauman, Beck, Bourdieu, Capital, Class, Individualisation, Self-Perception*

Introduction

1.1 For all their subtle differences and disagreements, the theories of individualisation forwarded by Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman share at least one core thesis: that agents today are increasingly exhorted to, and therefore do, perceive their actions and their fates as the consequences of their own, free, individual choices rather than social structural forces. For the German theorist this is a product of the demands of an ambiguous blend of welfare state policies and employment insecurity, whereas for Bauman individualisation is an insidious corollary of the hegemonic grip of neo-liberalism, individualism and consumerism on political and media discourse (see esp. Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). But in both visions, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002: 25) put it most clearly, people no longer, as they apparently once did in the past, talk of 'blows of fate', 'objective conditions' and 'outside forces' that have 'overwhelmed', 'predetermined' or 'compelled' them throughout their lives. Instead their narratives tell of 'decisions, non-decisions, capacities [and] achievements' in an 'individualistic and active' form in which they 'perceive themselves as at least partly shaping themselves and the conditions of their lives, even or above all in the language of failure'. Nowhere is this more pronounced, as Beck makes clear and Bauman implies, than in the disappearance from life narratives of *class* and its paraphernalia of economic and cultural constraints and habits.

1.2 This image is doubtless a little overdrawn, but that has not stopped it garnering considerable, if usually qualified, support, especially from those critical of neo-liberalism. No matter the specific focus, the standard position is to underscore the widening and strengthening of the structural inequalities of class in advanced capitalism – against the exaggerated accounts of fluidity given by Beck and Bauman themselves – but to reveal the painful paradox that, sure enough, people are increasingly misperceiving the limits and freedoms they deliver as personal problems, failures or triumphs (Roberts et al, 1994; Evans, 2002; Brannen and Nilsen, 2005; Devadason, 2006; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Nollmann and Strasser, 2009). The sole refuge for class in perceptions of social journeys nowadays, it seems, is amongst the upwardly mobile, who, because of the disjunctive situations they have faced, may well be more likely to rummage for a means of articulating their sense of difference and struggle and are hence unrepresentative

of the general climate (Savage, 2000; Lawler, 1999; Devadason, 2006; Lehmann, 2009).

1.3 Yet the empirical evidence underlying this stance is, in reality, both patchy and partial. Some of the studies use surveys deploying fixed categories of thought which, though granting a greater degree of extrapolation, override the undirected and complex deployment of self-perceptions *in situ* (e.g. Roberts et al, 1994); only some of them specifically target the perception of life's motors rather than broader questions of class identity producing by-the-way findings (e.g. Lawler, 1999); and most of them tend to examine only this or that fraction of the population – the young (e.g. Brannen and Nilsen, 2005), the socially ascendant (e.g. Lehmann, 2009), the more affluent (e.g. Savage, 2000) or whatever. Though useful for their substantive contributions, therefore, the various findings refuse to add up to a comprehensive *general* assessment of individualisation across social positions and generations and, with that, foreclose a comparative assessment of the different *ways* and *extents* to which individualisation may be realised amongst agents from varying structural locations.

1.4A lack of theoretical exploration exacerbates this problem – without an elaborated understanding of the nexus between social structures, perception and narrative, extant interventions preclude analysis of precisely *how* differences in resources could underlie or refract the atomisation depicted by Beck and Bauman. Yet even where there are more sustained thoughts the empirical research necessary to provide valuable supportive flesh is missing. Such is the case, for example, with Skeggs' (2004) Foucauldian-Bourdieuian argument that ways of seeing and talking about oneself (as reflexive, individual, cosmopolitan or whatever) are produced through discourses promulgated by the powerful: there is some buttressing from the accounts of the young women at the nucleus of *Formations of Class and Gender* (1997) and of the gay community (2004), but whilst these samples undoubtedly yield credible themes they are hardly the full picture and, indeed, their classless testimonies are contradicted elsewhere when the outlooks of others are scrutinised (e.g. Savage, 2000; Savage et al, 2001).

1.5 It would appear, then, that an assessment of individualisation filling these gaps is required, that is, one that attempts to elucidate and expound the relation of the popular thesis to class by targeting it head-on, surveying a mix of ages and social positions and rooting the question of perceived advantages and disadvantages in a qualitative examination of accounts and an explicit theoretical framework. Whilst it cannot pretend to offer a once-and-for-all, definitive answer to the issues at stake, this paper attempts to provide precisely such an appraisal.

Making Individualisation Testable

2.1 Insofar as it involves subjecting a batch of hypotheses to the trial of empirical research this enterprise is largely deductive, but, as the discontent with conceptual reticence may have hinted, it is no simple test of individualisation exactly as depicted by Beck and Bauman. This is not only because logic already reveals their postulations are, as they stand, deeply problematic (Atkinson 2007, 2008), but more importantly because it is simply false to pretend that there are no existing conceptual assumptions or formulations in play. Better to acknowledge these, subject them to rational construction and clearly present the guiding suppositions to be worked with. In this instance, the theses of Beck and Bauman need to be translated into a sound theoretical system that provides both a model of how class would shape perception if it were in full health *and* coherent conjectures on how the kinds of themes associated with individualisation could have emerged, how they would manifest themselves and how they may be countered.

2.2 So the contested concept is, following Pierre Bourdieu (1984), conceived in terms of economic capital, social capital and cultural capital – the last of these referring to the degree of 'symbolic mastery', or familiarity with abstract language and concepts, possessed (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). These together furnish one's conditions of existence – namely greater or lesser distance from necessity – which in turn generate certain dispositions to act, think and see the world in certain ways, or habitus. Importantly, this means that, insofar as there are certain classes of conditions of existence and habitus on the basis of similarity of capital stocks, schemes of perception and self-perception are themselves *classed*, regardless of whether they are communicated with the specific label of 'class'. Thus the power of class rests not on the appearance or absence of the explicit discourse of 'class' ('working class', 'middle class' and so on) in constructing and articulating one's life course, but on whether specific vocabularies of motive, as Mills (1940) called them, are *generated* and *differentiated* in some way by capital possession.

2.3 That said, ways of seeing the world are not formed only out of immediate adaptation to conditions of existence and hermetically closed off from others. Instead, the categories and associations spawned by structurally differentiated experiences congeal into nothing less than wide-ranging discursive and symbolic constructions aiming to represent the different sectors of the class structure (or social space in Bourdieu's terminology) which then, through the actions of enthusiasts and those delegated to speak for and about the 'groups', attain wider legitimacy and currency. This is the case with the discourse of 'class': the 'working class', the 'middle class', and a cluster of equivalent terms serving the same function such as 'chavs', 'Sloanes', etc., are all developed typification bundles, with the notion of 'class' traditionally gaining its strongest advocates, delegates and disseminators in the trade union movement as well as, of course, the social and political sciences (Bourdieu, 1987, 1991; Bolstanski, 1987). Different competing constructions are pitted against one another, especially in media and political discourse – this is what Bourdieu called the 'symbolic struggle' – and then in turn differentially apperceived, as Husserl would say, by the populace, that is, assimilated and harnessed to one's own conditions of life to frame self-perception. Obviously not all constructions have equal weight or gain equal credence: capital-rich agents, with greater control over the organs of communication and official definition (news corporations, the state, and so on), have greater ability (or symbolic power) to impose their own world-view as the legitimate and 'common sense' one (or the *doxa*).

2.4 Such are the essentials of the (phenomeno-)Bourdieuian take on class and perception (see further

Atkinson, 2010). So how can they be used to reformulate the pertinent claims of individualisation into feasible conjectures on perceptions of advantage and disadvantage and raise logical counters and caveats? The first step is to isolate the fundamental thesis to be assessed. Judging from what Beck and Bauman have said on the matter (see e.g. Bauman, 2001: 47; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 25), this is doubtless the idea that, when pushed beyond the banal personalism of pragmatic communication ('I want...', 'I chose...', 'I did...'), people generally ascribe their key enablements and setbacks to forces *interior* to themselves, such as innate or idiosyncratic tendencies ('personality'), abilities and physical attributes or free, active, responsible volition. By implication the opposite, individualisation-confuting scenario would thus be that people perceive their trajectories as driven by *external* forces, which from a Bourdieusian point of view – and sticking with indicators of the influence of class – would comprise recognition of the external forces and conditions issuing from capital possession in shaping the constraints and expectations that have characterised their path. People need not necessarily construe them as a product or a part of an abstract social structure, though that is entirely possible, but (more in line with the logic of practice) could instead perceive and describe them in terms of the particular events, domains and institutions of their individual lifeworlds, such as their school or family, that act as manifestations and mediators of capital inculcation and possession.^[1]

2.5 Yet even the first outcome, once thought through, would hardly provide an outright vindication of Beck and Bauman. For one thing, if the individualisation thesis attributes the genesis of the personalised 'internal' self-conception to the way in which state policy defines and caters to its citizens and, more generally, to the rise of neo-liberalism, then from a Bourdieusian perspective this can be interpreted as part and parcel of the power shifts in the symbolic struggle in the UK through the eighties: with the emergence of the New Right and Thatcherism as the forces of symbolic power, individualism, a scheme of perception carving the social space into individual-sized autonomous units and rooted, in Margaret Thatcher's case, in petit-bourgeois experience (Cannadine, 1998), took on a new doxic pre-eminence and was foisted upon the populace who, in turn, began to misrecognise the workings of capital as personal failings or achievements. The whole phenomenon would thus be perfectly explicable with the tools of class analysis rather than detrimental to them. Secondly, the *degree* or *form* of such individualism could well be refracted in some way according to capital. One possible example of this, which would also cast doubt on the novelty of the processes described by Beck and Bauman given its long-established character, is given by Bourdieu's idea of 'sociodicy', in which inequalities of embodied cultural capital are personalised, naturalised and misperceived amongst the dominated as rightly-rewarded innate intellectual capabilities and talents in line with the credo promulgated through the institutions of symbolic power:

When you ask a sample of individuals what are the main factors of achievement at school, the further you go down the social scale the more they believe in natural talent or gifts – the more they believe that those who are successful are naturally endowed with intellectual capacities. And the more they accept their own exclusion, the more they believe they are stupid, the more they say 'Yes, I was no good at English, I was no good at French, I was no good at mathematics.' (Bourdieu and Egleton, 1992: 114)

Fractions of the dominant possessing ample cultural capital, and thus symbolic mastery, on the other hand, may be more inclined to resist this characterisation and posit abstract causes for their success or failure.

2.6 None of these possibilities so far presuppose the presence of the *explicit* framework of 'class' for making sense of injustices, deprivations, opportunities and assumptions. That is a separable, second area of interest, for if people fail to link the discourse of 'class' to recognised capital advantages and disadvantages or, indeed, openly rebuff it (dependant on what 'class' signifies to them), then that could vindicate a diluted and enfeebled, but probably more plausible, image of individualisation. To be precise, this supposedly troublesome thesis, read through the conceptual lens outlined above, could be recast as little more than a description of the fading of the *discursive construction* of 'class' as a contender in the symbolic struggle, again rooted in the political shifts initiated in the eighties and, in particular, the weakening of the trade union movement by the Conservative government. The objective impact of class as a structural entity on narratives and perception would not stand or fall on the veracity of this account, but insight would be gained into the likelihood and character of mobilisation and resistance against the inequalities that do, in reality, shape life courses (see Atkinson, 2010).

2.7 In sum, then, there are two sets of issues – whether or not people perceive external constraints and enablements in some way and, if they do, whether or not they talk of them in terms of 'class' – and, in each case, possible scenarios to look out for. Now it is time to move on and try to confirm or confute this collection of constructed postulations through empirical inquiry.

Method

3.1 The specific method employed in any research act is, as Bourdieu and many others have now established, a practical rather than epistemological decision based on suitability to the task at hand (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 30). In this case, as already reasoned, the optimal entry point to perceptions of self and one's life path is through in-depth interviews in which individuals answer, in their own words, targeted queries on their major advantages and disadvantages in life and then – separately, at the end of the interview, so as to minimise influence on the participants' own interpretative schemes – on whether they perceive 'class' as having played a positive or negative role in their lives. The relative open-endedness of this method means that specific themes and the precise shape of the elements under investigation are bound to emerge from the data inductively, but, the investigation being deductive in general orientation, the focus must be less on the detail of each case, as is customary for this form of research, than on the pertinent *shared themes* and *family resemblances* between schemes of perception.

3.2 Interviewees were recruited through three mail-outs in the city of Bristol. For the first two, letters

inviting participation were sent to individuals chosen at random from the electoral registers of three wards of the city selected to maximise the range of capital stocks (using the proxy measure of occupational constitution as given by the 2001 Census – cf. the sampling method of Savage et al, 2005), whilst the third was sent out subsequently to recent graduates of the University of Bristol to ensure a more representative mix of ages. With the aid of a little snowball sampling, the total number of people opting to participate was 55. They range in age from 18 to 53 years with an average of 36, therefore covering an adequate spread of generations supposedly exposed to the forces of individualisation, and are evenly split in terms of gender. They include, however, only one member of a non-white ethnic minority and so, regrettably, limit the generalisability of the findings on that front.

3.3 The interviewees fall into three categories based on their relative capital stocks and trajectories. First there are the members of the dominant class (to use the properly relational term) who have reproduced their parents' class positions, or what might be called the 'static dominant' for short. They are distinguishable by their higher than average incomes and wealth (according to the January-March 2008 sweep of the *Labour Force Survey*), higher education, significant others or consociates with ample capital and such like, irrespective of their actual occupation (see further Atkinson, 2009), and their parents possessing similar attributes, and they form the largest category in the sample (26 in total). Then there are the 'static dominated' – those with low incomes, school-level education and so on, and with similarly situated parents – and, finally, a small band of upwardly mobile participants – those who started out with few parental resources but have ascended through social space to possess markers of the dominant class. Table 1 provides a summary and, to save the text from becoming overly cluttered, reference for the analysis.

Table 1. The Research Participants

Category	Names (ages)*
Static dominant	Abby (28), Adrian (40), Barry (47), Claire (38), Courtney (32), Craig (35), Debbie (36), Diane (40), Elizabeth (39), Emily (45), Helen (42), Humayun (31), Isabelle (26), Jackie (38), Karen (28), Liam (25), Mark (35), Nancy (46), Nigel (45), Oliver (40), Peter (49), Rachael (26), Rebecca (30), Sean (36), Sonia (25), Sue (42)
Static dominated	Andy (43), Caroline (25), Chris (33), Dave (51), Doug (43), Eddie (37), Frank (53), Gary (44), Gillian (29), Hannah (30), Jimmy (47), Joe (35), Josh (25), Maureen (43), Phil (33), Tina (18), Tracy (27), Trisha (37), Yvonne (42), Zoe (20)
Upwardly mobile	Bernadette (32), Gina (30), Lisa (34), Martin (34), Paul (41), Samuel (35), Tessa (28), Wendy (48), Zack (28)

* All names are pseudonyms and ages have been changed by one or two years either way to ensure anonymity.

3.4 The interviews were semi-structured, lasted 80 minutes on average (though they could extend up to three hours long), and actually gathered information on and narratives of the full sweep of life courses, from early years and education through work histories to the present day, before a subsequent section explicitly honed in on perceived advantages and disadvantages in life, as well as on politics, lifestyles and the general perception of 'class'. That life courses, lifestyles and political views are *objectively* shaped by class, and that interviewees do employ the discourse of 'social class' as a prominent, if fuzzy, scheme of typifications through which not only the social world but their place within it, i.e. their social identity, is thought, described and felt, has been shown elsewhere (Atkinson, 2010). Discovering whether the burden of responsibility for structurally allotted trajectories is shifted on to the interviewees' own, individual shoulders or, conversely, whether class, and 'class', permeate the verbalisation of sensed injustices and privileges is, therefore, one of the final pieces of the puzzle in the assessment of individualisation – a piece which must now be put in place.

Perceived (Dis)advantages

4.1 Let us begin first of all with the general question of whether structural forces are misread as individual motivations, attributes, shortcomings, personalities and wills or grasped as socially or 'externally' imposed and linked to conditions of existence in some way. Here the initial outlook would seem favourable to Beck and Bauman, for alongside slogans of individualisation to the effect that 'you pave your own way in life' (Gary), 'make your own opportunities' (Hannah), 'choose your own path' (Chris) and are 'accountable for yourself' (Doug), distinctly personal traits were commonly offered by both the dominant and dominated when pressed on advantages and disadvantages. Amongst the setbacks cited were, for example, lack of motivation (Dave), lack of attention (Rebecca), shyness (Bernadette, Elizabeth) and even physical attributes such as height (Tina) or clubfeet (Rachael), whilst such things as stubbornness and independence (Joe), sociability (Oliver, Tina), adaptability (Martin, Rebecca), jovial or friendly personality

(Courtney, Doug) and hard work (Paul, Sonia, Zoe) were forwarded as chief aids in life.

4.2 Yet that is where the support for individualisation ends, for far more frequent, including amongst these same interviewees, were appeals to the two sources of class power in contemporary society: economic capital (or simply 'money') and cultural capital (in the guise of 'education'). Regarding economic capital, the quintessential external, impersonal font of power, the dominant recognised that it had been a key resource and 'fall back' throughout their lives, giving them 'every sort of comfort' (Helen) and 'loads of advantages' (Nancy) such as allowing them to pursue 'opportunities' and practices that would otherwise have been off bounds. For example, Mark, a 35-year-old computer programmer, immediately recognised that, when it came to his higher education and ensuing pursuit of self-realising voluntary conservation work, the monetary resources provided by his parents – a university professor and teacher – were key:

WA: [...] do you ever feel that you've ever been advantaged in any way?

Mark: What above other people or...? Yeah I guess the background I've had, my parents have never been short of money. Always say, they've always been there to help out with the university, and when in Bristol [doing voluntary work], they've always been there as a fall back.

4.3 Similarly, Nigel, a university Reader in his forties, acknowledged the 'huge privilege' of not having to work whilst studying at university because of his distance from 'pressing financial concerns', i.e. distance from economic necessity, thanks to his affluent father (a doctor), and that it was only this, he says, that 'got me my first'. By contrast, the dominated, as well as the upwardly mobile, frequently noted the pernicious effect of relative penury in preventing them from following ambitions, achieving their full potential or leading a fulfilling existence. 'Money's always a question', 'I can't afford to...', 'there's no way financially' or variations thereof were recurrent, whether attached to descriptions of prohibitive course fees indefinitely deferring a projected acquisition of qualifications (Tracy, Maureen) or reskilling (Joe), of proximity to necessity compelling, in contrast to Nigel's situation, time and energy-sapping employment at university (Tessa), of a lack of means scotching various past-times from racing cars (Trisha) and attaining martial arts grades (Gina) to attending football matches (Jimmy), or of simply living life in consumer society according to the negative logic of 'don't go out for this, don't go out for that, don't get this, don't get that' (Tracy). The upshot is that, as Caroline, a 25-year-old nursery nurse, put it when discussing her family's financial position, the dominated feel they have 'missed out on a lot' in life and, crucially, are inclined to declare '*it's not my fault*' (emphasis added).

4.4 As to cultural capital, most of the dominant openly chalked much of their success down to the education they received – its content but also ethos, discipline and expectations – from their various elite schooling institutions (especially private schools, but also grammar schools). It was, in other words, seen as a product not of their own individualised ability or preference but of an *external factor*, a set of forces and demands inculcating capital whilst at the same time being secured by extant (economic or cultural) capital, over which they had no choice or control:

[...] my schooling put me at an advantage, cos as I say you don't have any choice about working when you're at private school, so you get more likely to achieve grades in exams [...].
(Elizabeth, 39-year-old computer programmer)

I was very fortunate to go to private school, cos I'm sure I would've probably been quite wayward and done my own thing at a state school. The state schools that were in my area were very dismissive of anything academic. I don't think I would've gone through to university particularly. So yeah, advantage was a good education [...].
(Debbie, 36-year-old science writer)

I think I had an advantage at eleven when I went to the grammar school. I think that was a very big advantage, very big. It just gave me access to all these opportunities, a world of opportunities really. And expectations, suddenly expectations were there about what would happen, rather than question marks.
(Jackie, 38-year-old project manager)

4.5 Amongst the dominated, however, there is a little more variation. Some, like the dominant, saw their lack of educational credentials – readily recognised as a bar from jobs they often otherwise felt capable of – as a product of external forces beyond their control. The most notable of these were the schools they attended, and not only because the dominated positions of these institutions within the field of education meant that the 'full facts' on 'whether you could progress' were absent (Jimmy), teachers were unsupportive (Zoe) or careers advisors mocking of aspiration (Doug). More fundamental, lamented most dominated interviewees, was the fact that the pedagogic methods were oriented to the nurturance of symbolic mastery ('theory', 'academic' work, reading, books, exams, etc.), something they were ill-prepared for given their parents' capital stocks, rather than the practical mastery they did possess ('practice', doing, observing, the vocational, etc.). As Hannah, a 30-year-old administrator, puts it:

[the school was] purely academic to be honest and there probably wasn't an awful lot they could've done. Whereas now, the schools that they're trying to create now have got more vocational opportunities as well, so that would have been more suited to me but at the time that wasn't the structure of the school. So I'm sure that there would have been an awful lot that they probably could have got more out of me [...].

4.6 On the other hand, however, a notable number of dominated interviewees, usually (though not always) those with very few qualifications, displayed what can only be described as an *individualisation of class* in

which class-based constraints of cultural capital are misperceived as individual-level failings (cf. Lucey and Reay, 2002; Gillies, 2005). To give just two instances:

That's the only thing that's held me back – myself [...] I'm very negative about myself. I never go for things that I probably could do, but my answer is always 'I'm not good enough' [...] it was a thing to drive me on, thinking I'm crap, I'm thick. I suppose that's why I've never really got that far in life.
(Tracy, 27-year-old booking clerk)

Sometimes I think, sometimes when I look through the adverts, when I was thinking of changing jobs on the odd occasion, you look through the job specs and they say you need so many grades for this, and I think maybe if I'd have worked harder at school I could've had those grades. But then you look on the flip side of that and think well, if I'd have had those grades at school, and worked harder, then I wouldn't be in a job where I'm looking for another job. I'd have been doing what I wanted to do. I mean a lot of the stuff that I've done through scouts and that were all experiences and things, and you don't get any certificates for doing that. I was more interested in doing the outside stuff then sitting down and writing and getting certificates. That sometimes makes me think perhaps I could've done better, perhaps I could've pushed myself a little bit harder, got the certificates and then had an easier life.
(Eddie, 37-year-old school caretaker)

4.7 It is not the school, one's background or external pressures that are to blame here, but one's individual ability – encapsulated in more than one case by the self-applied label 'thick' – and work ethic, seen to flow from the responsible self rather than the meeting of an educational culture with low capital resources.

4.8 This invidious scenario – recognition of educational advantage amongst the dominant yet an individualisation of structural features amongst the dominated – runs counter to the old idea, particularly popular amongst the historically-minded early representatives of cultural studies (e.g. Williams, 1959: 325ff), that the privileged tend to adopt a more individualistic outlook whilst the lower sections of social space remain more collectivist in orientation and acutely aware of social conditions. *Yet it is perfectly in line with Bourdieu's long-established notion of sociodicy* in which the view that success is a matter of innate talents or hard work – propagated by the dominant but questioned by the more cultural/liberal-left class faction with an extended symbolic mastery of social affairs, who are over-represented here – is disproportionately internalised as doxic by the dominated.^[2] The words of the dominated are, therefore, hardly new – something which would have at least partially vindicated the current vogue of individualisation – or problematic but in full accord with the realities of class first exposed in the sixties and seventies when the education systems of European states were beginning to expand (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979, 1990; Bourdieu, 1996).^[3]

4.9 In fact not even the individualist slogans displayed at the start of this section, again noticeably voiced mainly by dominated interviewees, buttress some diminished version of individualisation, for they are not necessarily products of recent social conditions alone either. After all, the doctrine of personal autonomy (and its underside, self-blame), as an integral part of individualist philosophies, has circulated in and out of general doxic intuition (in the West at least) for centuries with the development and propagation of philosophical and political *Weltanschauungen* and forms merely one component of the practical sense of self-understanding that nestles incoherently – such is the logic of practice – alongside recognition of social setbacks to greater or lesser degrees depending on historical and structural context (see Lukes, 2006). If anything, the individualism promoted by contemporary neo-liberalism will only have reinforced *existing* tendencies of self-perception. Thus, to twist the phraseology Beck (esp. 1998) himself mobilises to describe almost everything else, it seems that the relationship between individualised self-perception and classed self-perception is not a question of *either/or*, as he somewhat ironically implies, but *both/and*.

Enter 'Class'

5.1 Still, even if the dominant did tend to recognise their class-based (dis)advantages, at this stage the explicit idiom of 'class' is absent. So what if that term is brought overtly in to the frame and suggested as a possible source of constraint or enablement? Well, the responses once again offer little hope to Beck and Bauman's thesis: the vast majority of the interviewees *did* identify 'class' as playing some kind of role in their lives. This took two forms, neither of which, incidentally, evoked any real notion of collectivism or solidarity in the sense of an empathy with the sufferings of socially proximate others and articulation of collective goals and interests. On the one hand, many of the interviewees interpreted the (dis)advantages of capital recounted above in terms of 'class' or else forwarded new, related ones, showing a close articulation between the construction of 'class' and economic and educational means and the orientations these furnish. Trisha, for instance, saw her exclusion from a job on the basis of credentials and her lack of funds for car racing in class terms, whilst Elizabeth and Jackie anchored the educational advantages described above, and much more, in their perceived class backgrounds:

Other than, because my parents were, my father definitely was very middle class, middle yeah, middle class and my mum was probably – I think her mum was, well must have been middle class if she went to university, cos there's no way she would have done otherwise, but her dad wasn't, and that was an issue, very much an issue then, that they were different. [...] So in the sense that it influenced me in the fact that I expected to do some kind of training, not necessarily university but some kind of training rather than leave school at sixteen. You know I knew I wasn't leaving school at sixteen and I knew that from a very early age, it never, never occurred to me that leaving school at sixteen was an option, even though that I knew theoretically it was, if that makes sense. So in that sense it would have, it did affect me yes, but I wouldn't say I was aware of it, if you know what I mean.

(Elizabeth)

I grew up in a nice neighbourhood, I had a father that worked and a mother that didn't. Went to a nice school, went to a private school for the first part of my life, but I think more out of necessity than particular sort of 'oh yes we must send Jackie to the school'. Erm, had all the aspiration, you know had music lessons, didn't do pony riding, lots of my friends did. Erm, went to a good school with an assumption I'd do O levels, A levels, university. I think that all ties in, sadly, to being screamingly middle class.
(Jackie)

5.2 On the other hand, a large proportion of the interviewees, no matter the age or social position, located the effects of class *mainly on the level of interaction*. This played out in expressed difficulties of interpersonal relations, homophily and even discrimination – all processes which, insofar as they dissolve 'class' into relationships with concrete individuals, could be argued to represent another both/and scenario. Oliver, a 40 year-old operations manager, for example, indicated he had difficulty 'dealing with individuals which are deemed to be upper class', whilst others admitted that it shaped their social networks:

[...] my interests and the people that I choose to be friends with – a lot of that has to do with, a lot of my friends have a similar social background as I do, as my husband as well does.
(Rebecca, 30-year-old human relations advisor)

[...] to an extent, it used to dictate the sort of friends I would have. So when I was younger I wouldn't sort of hang out with what I saw as posh people, you know had a chip on my shoulder basically, whereas now it just doesn't, you know, I don't care, it doesn't bother me at all.
(Lisa, 34-year-old human relations officer)

5.3 Elaborating on this, Abby, a secondary school teacher in her late twenties who attended an exclusive private school as a child, states that she 'hasn't really mingled with those, with a broad cross-section of society cos of the kind of school I've gone to and the kind of university I've gone to. That is just simple fact.' She continues on to say that

I think people have a certain view of my ability to be professional based on my appearance, my accent, my schooling I suppose. So I suppose as I've walked into a job people have had preconceived ideas about me just on how I've walked in, and that – my own school hold me up as being the ultra-professional person ever. I don't think I am, and I think that's based a lot upon simply how I carry myself and how I project myself. [...] I don't think class has particularly affected me other than that. I don't really know.

WA: Do you think it could be seen as an advantage or disadvantage for other people?

Abby: What, my class?

WA: No, their class.

Abby: Advantage or disadvantage? I think people get quite cliquey. Certainly if I'm honest with myself, I mean there are certain working men's clubs that I wouldn't want to walk in to. I mean I look at my mum's family who are a kind of – we go back to Cheshire where my grandparents originate from and my mum originates from, when I meet my family, my mum's family, her cousins and things, I almost don't know quite how to have a chat about stuff, cos they've all had kids very young, they do things like they're butchers or they work in a supermarket or things like that. I can honestly say, hand on my heart, and it's not cos they're not nice, they're lovely people, I just don't really know what to have a chat about. Don't really know what to say cos they all do different stuff and their lives – I can't really talk about work or reading or some of the stuff I'm doing, or buying a house or doing stuff, boring stuff that I talk about I suppose, cos they're talking about a whole different spectrum of a different reality to me. And so I suppose there is, I almost feel like there's a little club going on based on their reality. They'd probably find the same if they came and sat and had dinner with me and a load of teachers, they'd be sat there thinking there's a little clique going on here.

5.4 In a similar vein, Adrian, a wealthy 40-year-old solicitor, acknowledges that 'sometimes you bump into people on holiday because all middle class people generally go to the same places on their holidays' leading him to admit that 'you basically cosset yourself into a particular part of society, feel very comfortable in that, and you just don't notice things so much because things you come across are of a certain type'.

5.5 From the point of view of the dominated, the interactive effects of class comprised instances of what Bourdieu called symbolic violence, or, as the interviewees described it, 'snobbery', being 'looked down on' or even 'discrimination'. This is described and analysed in much greater depth elsewhere (Atkinson, 2010), so a solitary illustration will suffice here. Joe, a 35-year-old technician (or 'glorified plumber' as he put it) who had, in his youth, been a keen and successful runner, baldly asserts that class 'put a stop to my athletics career'. Despite being 'one of the best' at the time, he explains, he remained uninvited to the England squad trainers' sessions, uninformed about certain race meets and overlooked for scholarships compared to 'gentlemen' of lower ability – all, he claims, because of his class:

It's just – okay you've got people who are racist, and people are fearful of other people coming from other countries. Well it's pretty much the same mental attitude with classes and snobbery to a degree. It's not a dissimilar mental pattern.

5.6 All these examples, whether illuminating elective affinity or underscoring the effects of difference, differentiation and the intuition of being 'above' or 'below others', are species of the same phenomenon: *the sense of social distance* granted by perception of the symbols and deportments signifying *objective* social distance (cf. Bourdieu, 1984: 241–4; Sayer, 2005). It is this that 'class', as a practical classification constituted through symbolic struggle, primarily refers to for these interviewees, not the scholar's concern with constraints or advantages, and so it is this that is evoked when the notion is overtly broached.

5.7 Indeed, this would even seem to be the underlying principle in those cases (about a fifth) where interviewees *did explicitly deny* the importance of 'class'. 'I don't think it's really been anything to do with me' (Claire), 'it never played a part in my life' (Dave) and 'it hasn't held me back' (Zoe) are just some of the ways in which they articulated this, despite the fact that these self-same individuals mobilised class labels at earlier points of the interview and recognised the benefits or blockades provided by their economic and cultural capital. This broken link between the discourse of 'class' and perceived advantages or disadvantages is no simple by-product of transforming social circumstances and a concomitant slipping of 'class' from stocks of knowledge, nor of a rejection of 'class' in a bid for respectability, as in Skeggs' (1997) research, or a difficulty linking class 'out there' to oneself, as Savage (2000: 112) suggests. Instead, it would appear to be largely because these individuals regard 'class' as pertaining purely to a system for classifying behaviour and appearance – and a confused and undesirable one at that – rather than a set of fiscal, educational or other constraints and enablements:

It wouldn't stop me talking to someone, or whatever, it's just a label. It's just a way of pigeon-holing things, you know, a way of getting your head round talking about things. It's just a vocabulary.
(Emily, 45-year-old personal assistant)

Claire: I suppose it is still an issue in that people still put themselves in classes and it's kinda, it seems to have been used as a derogatory way really, in both ways. I mean people say 'oh they're working class' or 'they're middle class' it's, I don't think it's very helpful, I don't think it's a helpful system but it still exists.

WA: Right okay, do you think it's ever played a role in your life at all?

Claire: Erm, I don't think so, no. I suppose I've had the odd, some people think that I'm a bit posh because I went to a private school, but then when – well I don't know that's people I know they think that initially and then think 'no, she's not!' [laughter]. But I don't know what people who don't really know me think, I don't know if it's an issue for them, I mean it's never been an issue for me, you know wherever people put themselves in the class hierarchy, but it might be for other people.
(Claire, 38-year-old senior manager)

5.8 Claire's statement clearly reveals that she understands class to be a system of classification for comprehending social distance which she notes others have used to derogate and insult – one of the key practical uses of perceptual-linguistic classifications – including in reference to her own 'poshness', but does not, given her lifelong experience of privilege and limited interaction with distant others in social space, view this as particularly disadvantageous for herself.

5.9 None of this is particularly surprising. As Williams' (1983: 60ff) account makes clear, and countless others (e.g. Cannadine, 1998) have fleshed out, there has always been a tension between the specific politicised construction of 'class' as a tool for representing oppression (or, more simply, inequality) promulgated by activists, trade unionists and intellectuals from Owen and Marx to Scargill, and the construction of 'class', rooted more in everyday experience, as simply synonymous with 'rank', 'station' or 'status', that is, as a means of categorising social distance on the basis of the observable signs (goods, behaviour, morals, etc.) of symbolic capital, with all its associated baggage of differential association, snobbery and 'relational judgement' (Savage, 2007: 4.16). The only change likely to have occurred is a relative strengthening and refinement of the latter conception given the weakening of trade unionism in Britain after Thatcher, New Labour's shift from talk of 'class' to talk of 'exclusion' (Fairclough, 2000) and a greater awareness of apolitical official and market research class categories with growing 'institutional reflexivity', to use Giddens' (1990) phrase (Savage, 2000, 2007).

Conclusion

6.1 It would be unwise, given the nature of the research and its sample, to over-extrapolate and insinuate that the themes found here are anything more than indications of what could be occurring on a broader scale (cf. Payne and Williams, 2005). Yet there is no doubt that the material surveyed poses a challenge to the validity of individualisation. As we have seen, participants from across generations, from various social positions and with divergent trajectories did perceive and express their lives in terms of external, class-based constraints and enablements, chiefly those of economic and cultural capital, whilst any individualism or individualisation of class that do occur, particularly amongst the dominated, is both old news and fully explicable in terms of class. Furthermore, most do still recognise that 'class' plays some part in their lives, though, admittedly, many fail to connect it to acknowledged setbacks and privileges and instead envision its primary role in terms of interpersonal relations and symbolic violence – an image which also leads others to deny its import in their biographies altogether. If only this were novel and fatal to class, rather than long-standing and emergent from the dynamics of social space, Beck and Bauman's descriptions of individualisation might have had some purchase.

6.2 Yet the second theme bears an irony as grim as if 'class' were denied altogether. For so long as it is associated with symbolic violence alone its amelioration will be conceived primarily in terms of *recognition* (acceptance and appreciation of difference) rather than *redistribution* of wealth, to use Nancy Fraser's

(1995) famous formulation, yet, as Bourdieu has shown, the symbolic differences and valuations of class are so deeply moored in the differential material conditions of existence that to target one without the other would be hopeless (cf. Sayer, 2005; Lovell, 2007). Throw into the mix the fact that material and cultural inequalities are disproportionately recognised by their beneficiaries and individualised by their sufferers, and that politicised constructions of 'class' have faded with the enfeeblement of trade unions, then the result is a recipe for *status quo* (see also Atkinson, 2010).

Notes

¹Against the contentions of strict subjectivism and voluntarism, the distinctions between *in situ* dispositional action and its *post-hoc* explanation, and between the reasoned model of social reality of the analyst and the distorted construction of the analysed (cf. the 'partial penetration' described in Willis, 1977), must be emphasised here – just because the power of capital is recognised *post-hoc* this does not mean that the actor has a full grasp of the principle of their action nor that they are conscious of it when they act.

²This helps explain the only two instances where cultural capital *was* individualised as innate intelligence or 'brightness' amongst the dominant as well: both Samuel (a 35-year-old surgeon) and Zack (a software engineer in his late twenties) were upwardly mobile from the dominated and, furthermore, both pursued natural sciences rather than social science or humanities at university, meaning that the *form* of their symbolic mastery could have pushed them towards the genetic explanations they proffered rather than social ones for a worldview which may have been first inculcated in their youth. It should also be made clear that the findings here are not necessarily at odds with those of Lucey and Reay (2002) and Gillies (2005) indicating that the privileged do see success in terms of natural intelligence and effort – notwithstanding the fact that their foci (the self-perception of school pupils and parents' perceptions of their children) are slightly different matters anyway, the tendency depends on trajectory and precise stock and composition of capital within the dominant class.

³To be fair to Beck this would seem to be within the timescale of his thesis, but the point is the process was recognised as refracted and driven by class long before he put his pen to paper.

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