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978-0-521-65915-4 - A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience

Simon J. Charlesworth

Excerpt

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Introduction: Dead Man's Town

Who taught you to hate the colour of your skin?
 Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair?
 Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and the shape of your lips?
 Who taught you to hate yourself from the top of your head to the soles of
 your feet?
 Who taught you to hate your own kind?
 Who taught you to hate the race that you belong to, so much so that you
 don't want to be around each other?
 You know . . . you should ask yourself who taught you to hate being what
 God made you. *Malcolm X*

Our relationship to the world, as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is
 not a thing which can be any further clarified by analysis; philosophy can
 only place it once more before our eyes and present it for our ratification.
 (Merleau-Ponty 1962: xviii)

This work is a description of lives in one of the old industrial areas of
 Britain. It is focused upon the town of Rotherham, part of what was once
 a whole network of interconnecting towns and villages that gave South
 Yorkshire its distinct culture. An area that has suffered de-industrialization
 and the attendant social consequences of poverty. It concerns deprivation
 and its wider consequences, personal and social, and looks to locate the
 problems socially and culturally. This book, and, more importantly, the
 archive of transcription that it emerges from, is an attempt to set down a
 living record, a testimony to the dying of a way of life; the extinction of a
 kind of people.

Yet describing the nature of working class people in an age of such frag-
 mentation and atomization, especially where so many are so uncertain, is
 not straightforward. There are, of course, the simple truths of what is

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everywhere on the streets but, listening to politicians, these simple things are endlessly contested. The middle classes fear the crime that is related to the economic marginality and social exclusion of the poorest third of the society, yet they want their own wages free of the tax burden involved in funding a civil society. For the working class, themselves, for whom the economically marginal and socially excluded are family members and neighbours, they have had to deal in the most palpable way with the decline of their own economic role and social position. Since the early 1980s, the gradual decline of the culture of the working class has been one of the most powerful, telling developments in British society. The bleakness of English society, what lies around us in the faces of the urban poor everywhere, emerges from this context, and yet there have been few accounts of the transition and consequences from amongst those who are unable to buy their way out of the conditions and into the protected elite spaces of the English middle and upper classes.

The book works through looking at the personal testimony of people who expressed something revealing about the nature of their lives in this milieu. Testimony was taken through recorded interviews and notes were taken from conversations participated in and heard. The task of trying to capture the voices of working class people, emphasized the gradual effacement of a way of life based around a coherent sense of the dignity of others and of a place in the world. Those around forty have a coherent way of describing their lives and a sense of what has happened to the working class, but, as one comes down through the generations, one moves away from the efficacy of any narrative of the social, away from the co-ordinates of class, and encounters an arid individualism devoid of personal embedding in something beyond the ego. The coherence of a spoken common understanding based upon mutual respect and shared sources of value, becomes more and more infrequent until, among the very young, understanding and value seem impossible. An inescapable conclusion of the work seems to be that the most dispossessed individuals understand their lives the least and are certainly the least able to articulate their existence. At times it has seemed to me that the central issue of the work was muteness, silence, inarticulacy and the problem of accounting for the available sense that grounds these lives and which the silence rises amidst. One cannot adopt a formalized systematic procedure for recording this, one simply has to be amongst this life and do the best one can to see the traces in the details of these people's speech of the world as it is for them and to be sensitive to what it makes of them. And what is true of the recording of phenomena, is true of its writing. Many expecting sorrowful stories of poverty and moving testimony, the bleeding-heart prose that reassures readers of their

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own sensitivity, will find my prose frustrating. My first task is to elucidate the phenomena, not to write something that is easy to read.

Hence, documentary description is part of its method but not its sole aim. The work tries to bring to light the sources that contribute to making working class people recognizable as people of a certain type, subject to an objective meaning. My aim has been to try to illuminate the obscure processes that lead to the invisibility of the sources of everyday misery and stigmatization involved in the constitution of a group of people who know themselves in certain ways: ways that have consequence for their life-chances and forms of self-realization.

Although this purpose is sociological, the subtlety of the processes that concern me, have drawn me away from strictly sociological literatures towards anthropology and philosophy, particularly towards phenomenological ideas. Such writing is concerned to provide insight into how, through the human situation, phenomena come to have personal meaning, a lived-through significance that may not always be transparent to consciousness. The focus is upon involvement in a natural-cultural-historical milieu within which individuals discover themselves as subject to meaning. This tradition stresses that we can only understand human phenomena, such as language, in practice, or use. Moreover, this tradition shares Wittgenstein's effacement of the primacy of an inner realm of phenomena, private to each individual, by insisting that we appreciate the role of affective behaviour, and recognize the body as the realization, or objectification, of the soul. Of particular importance, this tradition embeds human communicative processes in what McGinn calls a 'pre-epistemic relation to other human subjects which is rooted in our immediate responsiveness to them' (McGinn 1997: 8). It is this tradition's sensitivity to the grounds of the human, to the conditions of humanity, that I have come, over and over, to experience as being important in understanding the lives of people whose social environment 'grounds' their humanity in ways that curtail their generative competences for language use and expressive behaviours; inhibits the mediums through which they might found a richer form of existence based upon a fuller realization of the potentialities embodied in the forms of association they currently realize.

These ideas, with their unusual sensitivity to the significance contained in the expressivity of the human body, are particularly suited to one of the key problems of this work. A disturbing feature of the world I am trying to capture is that it is being enveloped by silence. A silence that is not merely metaphorical, one that does not simply reflect these people's relationship to the political institutions of England,¹ but one which describes the form of their intimate lives. It is in the most personal dimensions of intimate life,

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that the cultural conditions of working class life are most pronounced and most disturbing.

Yet there is an important issue here. Writing involves one generating an order, and the documentary method relies upon ethnographic techniques, most importantly, upon the recording of testimony. A central aspect of this work has been the recording of voices that tell their own moving stories. These people chose themselves by showing that what for many has remained, in some uneasy sense, unspeakable, is not inexpressible if we are capable of recognizing and exploring the residual traces² of damaging, fracturing experiences that have been incorporated by individuals from the grounds through which they have become what they are. Yet what is impossible to represent here is the pervasive silence which surrounds the instances of testimony and which the resultant transcription only apparently contradicts. The sense of vulnerability-bound inarticulateness does pervade some of the transcription and is a reason why I tried so hard to preserve the verbal form of the speech, with all its inarticulate mumblings and broken lapses, but the form of the work cannot capture the bleak darkness of the invisibility of these people's lives to themselves. My task throughout has been to record the instances of expression that exhibit the conditions which render so many quiet. It is a paradox that rendering this intelligible depended upon getting these people to speak.

There is a central and pervasive hermeneutic aspect to the project, in that it is an attempt to understand phenomena, whose sense is 'incomplete, cloudy, seemingly contradictory – in one way or another, unclear' (Taylor 1985: 15); or whose sense coheres in a background of implicit meanings that exist before, and as a condition of, individuals' constitutive self-understandings. There is something paradoxical in this project of writing a culture whose being is not enshrined in self-conscious cultural representations and thus for which gesture and enunciation are the seat of identity. If one is to understand and represent this experience, we need a phenomenological hermeneutics capable of recognizing the importance of pre-discursive, pre-rational constituents of intersubjectivity. Without this, we will fail to recognize the forms of humanity that humanity takes for those whose being is shaped by the absence of freedom to become other than what they find themselves having to be. If we are capable of recognizing the human processes involved in the constitution of the inhuman and thus how what is spontaneously perceived as abject emerges from the conditions of human culture, then we can understand how critical, racializing, comments come to be made about people so highly visible because of their demeanour and yet who are also completely lacking in the resources to represent themselves.

I need here to point to the irony involved in producing too strong a sense of a group capable of articulating their own experience when the central experience the writing is trying to communicate is of a confusion based upon a radical dis-embedding of individuals from social conditions of sociality, and thus from forms of sense and, hence, of sensible coherence. It is as if slowly, carefully, descending everywhere upon the realm of these personal lives, a silence is falling like snow, erasing the pathways through which we might return, once again, to the village of our being. Yet, the truth is that, for many, those paths were being erased whilst we were struggling to find our way. One of Toni Morrison's characters insists: 'Listen here, girl, you can't quit the Word. It's given to you to speak. You can't quit the Word' (Morrison quoted in Nbalia 1991: 102). Yet, in Freire's sense of 'speaking one's own word' (Freire 1970: 121), from amidst one's experience and the judgements of the group who share that experience, many have, unknowingly, given up on the word. Its possibility belonged to spaces and habits whose conditions are gone. During a period of mass unemployment, in which work has become more atomized and more precarious, insecurity has become the condition of too many. Elementary solidarities of family, work and place, once consolidated by the culture of the trade union and tertiary education, have been washed away by the corrosive cleansing of *laissez-faire* economic practice; the logic of financial markets sacrificing for profit the cultural configurations that human decency requires. In place of the dignities embedded in these elementary solidarities we can see a fractured anomie, juvenile delinquency, crime, drug and substance abuse, alcoholism and a host of other problems. For too many the sands of their time and experience have been washed away from beneath them, taking with them the customary reference-points of their existence. For these people, the condition Camus described as 'the absurd' is a sociological, not a metaphysical, predicament:

A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and light, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity. (Camus 1975: 13)

The reasons for our world have crumbled. Hard work and education seem to lead nowhere, and the endless round of consecutive governments' retraining policies are known for what they are. Many have learned the lie of the lies that sustained the old world and know no stories of a promised land. Yet, unlike the heroic figures of Camus' work, this experience of the absurd is different. These are not individuals divested of intuitive feeling for

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'the chain of daily gestures'³ (Camus 1975: 19), rather, it is as if the grounds of their practical belief, the networks of an older world, have been washed away, slowly erased so that they can never know the satisfaction of forms of coexistence that might bring the peace of value. Rather, the world they inhabit is fractured, no longer supported by a steady stream of habitual associations, and their personal, affective world is pre-constituted as chaotic: absurd. Yet this is the only sense we have ever known. So this is an absurdity that cannot know itself because it cannot experience the ontological security and social grounds upon which self-justification might be realized. There is only ambiguity and confusion. This is an experience of the absurd emanating from a realm that is fractured, perceptually aggressing and negating. It is a world whose solicitations lead to a relation to the world, a form of inhabitation, that holds itself at the primary level of habituation, as close as possible to a realized automacy that leaves individuals less affected by consciousness: knowing only through the comportment by which sense is realized; knowing the world through a medium and in a manner that emerges from conditions of deprivation and symbolic impoverishment; the price that body-subjects pay for the absence of humanity that we all require but which only the privileged are able to inscribe in their own protected social space. This experience of absurdity, then, emerges from an economic and cultural condition, and is manifest in the mental and physical ill-health that afflict people. This sense of the world haunts working class existence. And this is what one would expect if 'man is a being without a reason for being' (Bourdieu 1990c: 196); because, if it is fundamental to being that it is radically ungrounded, or groundless, standing in need of a sense of life produced by human association and the sources of value to which it gives rise, then the condition of being-in-the-world must be more problematic for those whose lives are most devoid of social consecration. That is, for those condemned to live their meaning through self-understandings based upon notions of utility and stigmatization.

The book begins with a brief survey of the history and demography of the area, and moves on to focus upon the experience of the people of the town by considering the sense that emerges from examples of everyday conversations. The work progresses through the form of a series of meditations about the relationship of persons to their social environment. Whilst this is a particular site, understanding the lives of these people gives us an insight into the nature of being working class in the traditional industrial areas of Britain. The task is to highlight key experiences and to focus on what is characteristic in them: that is, to focus upon what makes those experiences possible.

Throughout, I allow the transcribed material to represent itself, without

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directly interpreting at the surface level of the speech acts themselves, since these have illocutionary force (and of course, perlocutionary force). The material tries to capture the form and force of the speech that emerges from these people's practices and connect it with a modality of being and the series of social and economic conditions which that modality originates in, and which the speech exemplifies. I try to look beneath what is said, at what it offers: the possibility of recognizing the relation to human being that being working class instils. It is a humanist attempt to show the problems of a naive humanist universalism that fails the poor by failing to recognize the real personal consequences of being poor. The book tries to exemplify the extent to which humans become differentiated and come to live their marks; that is, come to live amidst a background of social meanings, positive and negative, through which they experience themselves as individuated, as a being of a certain *kind*. As Nagel puts it, '[for] an organism [to have] conscious experience *at all* means . . . that there is something it is like to *be* that organism' (Nagel 1979: 166). And this work is concerned to elicit the originary experience through which a person comes to experience the world, through life among others, as a distinct place through experiences which teach a certain relation to themselves, the world and experience. To be working class, then, is to be part of a socially realized category. The book deals with the category 'working class' as an ontological concept, one which traces the nature of its realization through social relations that define individuals' objective being, and thus create for agents the modes of subjectivization through which their world and their forms of comportment are realized as possible solutions to the problems of a world that opens up to them as, always, from birth onwards, the world of the subjects they objectively are, beings of a certain distinct kind. It is the world of the working class person that this book wants to communicate, and it is for these reasons that it homogenizes, because it is looking for what is shared across the differences of life style, gender or race that must necessarily striate a multi-ethnic community that is poor and deprived; at what allows us to know each other as people who share a commonality in the eyes of those who do not share what is obvious in us.⁴

This is not a Marxist interpretation of working class experience, yet one of the most important reasons for this approach is to try and show that the social and cultural resources for developing one's inalienable human capacities, what Marx called one's 'species being', of coming to fruition as a person of categoric value, are inequitably distributed, with the result that the possibility of the development of capacities important to personal fulfilment are frustrated. Moreover, I depict a relation to being, contained in working class people's economic and social conditions, that forecloses

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upon and makes almost impossible autonomous ways of becoming a self-developing subject, of value for oneself and to others; capable of founding through oneself and others an intersubjective realm of mutually constituted empathic self-involvement. If this study convinces, then the demonstration that this condition exists must be an indictment of the economy which produces this relation to self and personhood. In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that ‘to understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built’ (1969: xiv). This work tries to illuminate that structure, and to show how it creates forms of being through which its fundamental patterns of relations are realized by inscribing between bodies forces of attraction and repulsion that reproduce the structure: at a price inequitably distributed by those invisible scales of justice which settle destinies in a racist society.

This book, then, is not the sociological equivalent of behaviourist studies of the natural world. It hopes to describe not merely what people in Rotherham do, the tapestry of practices that are the backdrop to their life-projects, but how they feel, and why; and what those feelings reveal about their relationship to social reality; how their being is mediated such that they are the subjects of such feelings: how they are made subjects in this way.

The history of the area, and of the country, means that the main concern is with the lives of young people who left school to face mass youth unemployment and a life governed by poor working conditions, poor wages and the almost constant threat of trips to the Department of Social Security and Job Centre. I have interviewed a large number of people who I have met throughout my own life in the town. And, where it was not possible to record their voices, I have written down their comments at the first possible opportunity. Clearly, being male, I have more access to men’s private, intimate conversations than to women’s, but at least one third of my respondents were women, and women’s voices are a significant contribution to the book. Similarly, a significant number of the quotations that I have used are from Asian men, with whom I have both worked and trained. There was a sense of common concern, among both the women I interviewed and the members of the Pakistani community, about how impoverished their lives in Rotherham are, and they felt it inappropriate to mark what is fashionably called their ‘subject-position’ in the text. Clearly, women and members of the Asian community experience a commonality of location, of a life-impoverishing entrapment that they feel as a collective fate that shapes their experience of time and space and which they feel is confirmed in their conversations with others. For these reasons, in my original text I have not recorded these differences, reciprocating the respect these people exhibited in their own intuitive sense of their own lives as situated by the common

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humiliations and degradations that structure life in the working class life-course. However, it is conceivable that some readers might share the feeling that a colonizing 'white male . . . doxic heterosexuality is absolutely taken for granted' and effaces differences of race and gender: a response which I have received from at least one reader of an earlier draft. I am happy to let these criticisms stand if only because the work of communication the writing emerges from is, in any case, one in which these issues do not seem to be prominent. What emerges spontaneously, I have recorded and used. That people have participated in the way that they have and contributed what they have felt important is significant in itself. Furthermore, there are literatures on recognized ethnic groups as there are on issues concerning sexuality, and it is obvious that women are a powerful group of spokespeople for the experience of women. There are many women enjoying careers speaking for the experience of women in a way that is simply not true for the experience of working people. It seems to me that the university has been too silent about an experience that too many share outside the domain of the academy and the politics of representation and legitimacy that absorb so many of the intelligentsia. In this context, it seems that this project has a certain logic to it.

The academy has not, however, been over-eager to embrace the view from South Yorkshire, which has recently been shown, yet again, to be among the very poorest regions in Europe. And certainly a sociological community committed to projects concerned with the latest forms of a developing modernity, and fashioning categories that help us understand its newest cultural configurations, was not going to share, nor particularly respect, an interest in the living archaeology of a decaying world that in their own genealogy is unimportant, unexotic and, as a phenomenon, simple. The problem, however, is that this pattern of social development is not particular to South Yorkshire: it is a global phenomenon leaving disempowered, dispossessed people the world over invisible within their own national cultures. Labour is unrooted, dis-embedded, being made migrant the world over, creating people so vulnerable and atomized that they carry the marks of their impoverishment in their bodies as oddity and illness. Cheap labour, scrounging a day here, a day there, a mass of bodies rendered worthless by ubiquity, fit to clean or lift, care or dig, mend or clear, yet invisible except as a threat, aliens among their own species. This condition is ontological, this is social difference, categorization, realized in the being of beings. How could bodies share this contemporaneity as a life-course and not share a large part of their being? This is the primordial ground from which individuation springs. This is the experience revealed in the talk of the people of the town, and it warrants the moral stand of commonality

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that their communication exhibits and thus which I have felt a deep obligation to honour.

The original work was drawn from a base of forty-three interviews, although the ethnographic element from which I have written down conversations from disparate spaces gives me a much wider base of material in which to contextualize and extend the voices recorded. Moreover, these sources together have provided me with a developing archive of the thoughts of the people of the town. The original work was drawn from an archive of 350,000 transcribed words. This has consistently been added to and is part of an ongoing project. However, what emerged from men and women of all ages was a remarkably coherent story of the loss of a way of living that was based upon hard work and industry, within which there was a sense of friendship and relation, of basic dignity and respect. Of something that one could live in. Of a once-present state, now lost, in which individuals could plan a future, buy a house, marry, have children, live a life that, though constrained by the routines of work, offered some security and some circumscribed pleasures. However, the decline of traditional industry and its replacement with jobs governed by new working practices have brought great vulnerability at work, through lack of companionship, as well as at home through worry about the security of employment, its duration and the low pay most jobs offer. Such changes have meant that people do not feel attached to a future, something about which they feel great anxiety, a worry that touches virtually all aspects of their lives and which makes their experience of the present one of a misery born of hopelessness. It is a phenomenon Camus understood: 'A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future' (Camus 1975: 35) and, one might add, 'to the present as well'. Writing about the nineteenth century, Gash has written:

Some years before the general election of 1841 the realization was growing that there was a social question to which middle-class sectarian and party conflicts had little relevance. 'A feeling very generally exists', ran the opening sentence of Thomas Carlyle's famous pamphlet on *Chartism* in 1839, 'that the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present; that something ought to be said, something ought to be done, in regard to it'. When intelligent and socially conservative members of the educated classes considered the state of industrial England and Scotland, two reflections usually occurred to them. One was the instability of a society where thousands of men, cooped up in mean houses and narrow streets, without savings, adequate poor relief or even gardens of their own in which to grow food, could be thrown out of work or put on reduced wages at a moment's notice because of trade depression. The other was what seemed to them the artificiality of a system where the traditional framework of social life – commu-