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

Simon J. Charlesworth

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A phenomenology of working class experience

This moving and challenging book by Simon Charlesworth deals with the personal consequences of poverty and class and the effects of growing up as part of a poor and stigmatized group. Charlesworth examines these themes by focusing on a particular town – Rotherham – in South Yorkshire, England, and using the personal testimony of people who live there, acquired through recorded interviews and notes from conversations. He applies to these life stories the interpretative tools of philosophy and social theory, drawing in particular on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty, in order to explore the social relations and experiences of a distinct but largely ignored social group. The culture described in this book is not unique to Rotherham, and Charlesworth argues that the themes and problems identified will be familiar to economically powerless and politically dispossessed people everywhere.

SIMON J. CHARLESWORTH is a Research Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge.

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Acknowledgements

This part of a book must have particular significance for someone who, ordinarily, should never have written one. There is something tragic in achieving literacy to encounter, time and again, the disinterest of publishers and journals alike and one's exclusion from the sites that give sense to the practices of culture; all of which ensure one's estrangement from the skills that makes a simple gratitude possible. After so much unemployment and the wastage of so much of my time, it is difficult to feel that what is written here has any value.

I was educated at Rotherham College of Arts and Technology; by all that is involved in that trajectory. I was taught to write by Jenny Greatrex and Martin Happs; introduced to sociology by Diane Bailey; and Eileen Walsh struggled in the face of my cultural deficits to teach me 'A' level English.

My writing style owes much to the influence of that milieu, to staff and students alike. If holding degrees were sufficient to protect people like us, then I, and many others, would owe these people a great deal. Martin Happs taught an assortment of ill-prepared comprehensive school failures, condemned to youth training and varieties of poor work, to compete with the best that get places at traditional English universities. I owe a debt to Dr Peter Ward who introduced me to philosophy and slaked a mind that had always hankered after concepts but never had the education to enjoy them. Like him, I still share a passionate interest in Wittgenstein that has often inspired me in the face of the corruption and bankruptcy of English higher education. It is a great pity that their efforts really count for so little in the face of the experience that many of us have had. Rotherham tech was the finest, and only real, intellectual experience that I have ever had. And it wasn't simply the teaching that helped us acquire the dispositions and cultural skills to get through 'A' level and enter university well educated and articulate, it was the atmosphere among the students which was egalitarian,

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non-hierarchical and based upon an unconscious sharing of resources and kindness that helped many of us recover the deficits that state schooling creates and entrenches. It is remarkable the kinds of sociality that emerge when people face odds that are against them, and put themselves at stake in such an inequalitarian and often cruel educational system. For many of us, doing 'A' levels was remarkably difficult and straining and our deficits demanded a huge amount of work and highly considerate teaching by people who had a deep sense of the nature of our experience and perceptions and a sense of how to 'translate' between our reference and that of the texts that we had to know. The atmosphere among the students is something that I have never forgotten. It was based on a consideration and solidarity that characterizes the best of working class culture. The maturity and decency of the students I knew at Rotherham tech could never have prepared me for the culture of the English university. The intense decency and qualities of friendship I knew at Rotherham tech had come to seem ever more miraculous as I had to deal with those who infest the English university system. I had come to be convinced, by the endless personal criticism, of me and the decencies that I expected from the world, that I had dreamt the forms of relation I had grown to maturity amidst, only to go back after my Ph.D. and to find the forms of relation unchanged. It is fitting that I acknowledge the deep influence upon my sense of life of students like Kevin Happs, Alex Matheo, Phil Hoares and Patrick Moran, who tragically lost his life, as well as Andy Sutcliffe, Jennifer Childs, Lindsay Robinson, Christina Whorley, Helen Old, Stacey and Angela. Above all else, they instantiated, practically, an ethical system and form of concern about human existence and the immediate value of human beings that I have found completely absent at university. They are people who stand, unknowingly, for the best I've ever known. When people have asked me, with all the self-evidence of the racism at the heart of English elite culture, why I am like I am; they are why. I have struggled to hold on to the decencies they embody, the schemata of perception, thought and action that structure their lives.

Whilst university was an experiential black hole for me, sucking all of human value from all I had known and everything that I was, and whilst I went to university without needing much by way of teaching, I nevertheless owe personal debts to: Professor Margaret Archer, Terry Lovell and Dr Tony Elger, who had the insight and compassion to treat me as the friend I never had there. I must thank Mr G. H. Tan for his friendship. At Cambridge, I must thank Professor Geoffrey Hawthorn for being prepared to supervise me when I encountered a cold indifference and critical atmosphere from staff and students alike who manifest a clear disdain for me and

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projects that seemed too parochial to an international community concerned with issues of a more global import. Geoffrey Hawthorn remains the only person in that department who engages me on anything more than a basis of minimal tolerance, but I must also thank John Thompson for being prepared to act as referee. I must also thank Michael Black for doing his best to convert a punctuation attuned to the rhythms of South Yorkshire dialect, into something approximating standard English grammar. At Clare Hall I'd like to thank Tony Edwards and the painters, especially Darren, for sharing a tea with me and, also, the secretaries Elizabeth Ramsden, Wenda Torrell and especially Paula Herbert, for being an island of humanity and for tolerating my need to have a good gab about the references of my life and to laugh occasionally. I'd also like to thank Professor Gillian Beer and Ed Jarrod for their support.

Mike Fox saved me from the madness of being the only one. We joked that if ever we got through and got published, we'd say that it was *in spite* of Cambridge University. It is difficult to express how hard it can be living amongst some of the most privileged people in the world when you come back to (or from) the context described in this work. Little wonder it was so difficult for people to know me. The homogeneity of elite educational institutions establishes conditions for the most ruthless forms of discrimination that I've ever seen. With so many elite bodies together, there is a savagery to the processes whereby personal relations are constituted that is paid for by the few exceptions who make it into such places.

However, for one three-month period there were some miraculous exceptions and I must acknowledge the friendships of Matt Long, Guillaume Mallet, Roel Stercx, Andrew Slayman (thanks for the computer and books), Peter Lyk-Jenson, Matt Kirov, Elizabeth St George, Anastasia Economu, Orietta Maizza, Fiona Somerset and Imogen Crowther.

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