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The Moral Significance of Class

The Moral Significance of Class analyses the moral aspects of people's experience of class inequalities. Class affects not only our material wealth but our access to things, relationships and practices which we have reason to value, including the esteem or respect of others and hence our sense of self-worth. It shapes the kind of people we become and our chances of living a fulfilling life. Yet contemporary culture is increasingly 'in denial' about class, finding it embarrassing to acknowledge, even though it can often be blatantly obvious. By drawing upon concepts from moral philosophy and social theory and applying them to empirical studies of class, this fascinating and accessible study shows how people are valued in a context in which their life-chances and achievements are objectively affected by the lottery of birth class, and by forces which have little to do with their moral qualities or other merits.

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Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 Introduction	1
2 From the habitus to ethical dispositions	22
3 Recognition and distribution	52
4 Concepts of class: clearing the ground	70
5 Struggles of the social field	95
6 Moral and immoral sentiments and class	139
7 Responses to class I: egalitarianism, respect(ability), class pride and moral boundary drawing	169
8 Responses to class II: explanations, justifications and embarrassment	187
9 Conclusions and implications	213
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	243

Preface and acknowledgements

I was tempted to call this book ‘Think You’re Better Than Us, Do You?’, as that challenge, real or imagined, gets to the heart of the moral significance of class in everyday life. Class is not a reflection of moral worth or needs, and its relationship to merit is zero in childhood and more cause than effect later. Yet since class fundamentally affects the kind and quality of life we can lead its legitimacy is in question. This is what gives class its moral significance, not simply as a matter for moral and political philosophers to consider, but for our daily lived experience, in terms of how people treat and value one another. For all the many books on class in social science, remarkably few of them analyse the moral dimension of class. This is because of the wider problem, particularly in sociology, of what Axel Honneth terms ‘anti-normativism’, which renders opaque the evaluative character of our relationship to the world. In particular our concerns – the things that matter to us for our well-being, the things which we value and care about – are either ignored or dealt with in an alienated and alienating way which fails to identify why they matter so much.

Although this book is very much about the moral texture of everyday, lay, experience, I shall use concepts and analyses from philosophical literature on ethics – much of it normative – as well as sociology, to interpret lay responses to class. This is an unusual combination – indeed it is an experiment – but I hope to convince readers of its value primarily by example. At the same time I shall use and refer to many concepts which are simple and indeed familiar in everyday life, but my belief is that such is their familiarity that they are taken for granted instead of analysed. When we do examine them, we frequently find that they are rich in explanatory resources and normative implications.

This book was completed with the support of an ESRC fellowship, and sabbatical leave from Lancaster University.

Intellectually the book is most indebted first to the work of the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose untimely death in 2002 lost social science an outstanding theorist and its most perceptive analyst and enemy of class,

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[More information](#)

viii Preface and acknowledgements

and secondly to that widely misunderstood figure of the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith.

Closer to home, I would like to thank John O'Neill for his generosity and clarity in discussing philosophical matters. For suggestions, feedback and generally provoking further thought, my thanks and appreciation to Margaret Archer, Jo Armstrong, John Baker, Rosemary Crompton, Norman Fairclough, Steve Fleetwood, Bob Jessop, Tony Lawson, Kathleen Lynch, Maureen McNeil, Jamie Morgan, Diane Reay, Garrath Williams, and Majid Yar, and likewise to Beverley Skeggs, Alan Warde, Nick Crossley and the other members of the Manchester Sociology Bourdieu group. For supporting research and sanity in academic life, I would like to thank Bob McKinlay, and Bob Jessop and my other sociology colleagues at Lancaster. For making the department run smoothly and happily, my thanks to Claire O'Donnell, Karen Gammon, Cath Gorton, Pennie Drinkall, and Joann Bowker. For musical sustenance I would particularly like to thank the VSBs, Richard Light, Gillian Welch and David Rawlings, and the late, incomparable, Kathleen Ferrier. My love and thanks to Eric Clark, Bridget Graham, Steve Fleetwood, Helle Fischer, Costis Hadjimichalis, Frank Hansen, Richard Light, Kevin Morgan, Caroline New, Wendy Olsen, John O'Neill, Lizzie Sayer, Beverley Skeggs, Dina Vaiou, Linda Woodhead and Karin Zotzmann for friendship and support, and special thanks and good wishes to Abby Day. The book is dedicated to my late mother, Mary Sayer, 29.9.1910–18.10.2003.