

Bread and Roses

Voices of Australian Academics from the Working Class

Dee Michell, Jacqueline Z. Wilson and
Verity Archer (Eds.)



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INTRODUCTION

A Working-Class World-View in an Academic Environment

No more the drudge and idler—ten that toil where one reposes,
But a sharing of life's glories: Bread and roses! Bread and roses!

—James Oppenheimer, 1911

Oppression works from the bottom up and works not by mobilising people to heroic effort, as with Bolshevism and Nazism, but by rendering them intellectually, culturally and politically inert.

—Arran Gare, 2012

In many ways class is an ‘invisible topic’ in Australia as it is in America. One possible explanation is that the Weberian-inspired expression ‘socio-economic status’ has replaced the once popular ‘class’ in contemporary discourse. Another is that we share the American illusion that everyone is middle-class now (Christopher, 2009). As well, the class conflict and resultant periods of sustained class analysis during the 1910s, 1940s and 1970s (Connell, 1975) have given way to much needed intersectional analyses of gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity. However, whereas these categories of difference are now rightly recognised as *differences*, class differences continue to be seen as ‘better or worse “taste”’ (Jensen cited by Christopher, 2009: xviii; also see Michell, 2011). And although racism is generally regarded as intolerable, and sexism and homophobia regularly challenged—and again, rightly so—tellingly the term ‘classism’—which refers to the generally low social esteem in which those who have limited access to a decent income and occupation are held (Bletsas & Michell, 2014)—does not yet exist in the Macquarie Dictionary. Nevertheless, it is routine for classist attacks to be made against people from such backgrounds. For example, assumptions are made that they have neither the capacity nor desire to achieve high levels of education, even at the Federal Government policy level and in a way that is unimaginable today if speaking of women or Indigenous Australians (Bletsas & Michell, 2014). As in America, working-class people are stereotyped as ‘rude, uncouth, illogical, loud, disruptive, etc.’ (Christopher, 2009: 107), mocked and called classist names like ‘bogan’ or ‘feral’ without a second thought and without criticism or condemnation. Indeed, as Christopher Scanlon (2014) suggests, it is preferable to use the word ‘bogan’ rather than expose the myth of egalitarianism as just that, a myth.

Despite the illusion of middle-classness, since 2009 there has been considerable Federal Government investment in recruiting students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. (Although it is not clear in policy documents, the category of low SES overlaps with that of working class because of the latter's association with trades and labouring occupations, many of which are poorly paid and poorly regarded.) This investment resulted from what is now known as the 'Bradley Review'. During the 1990s scholars had already noted the considerable progress being made with increasing numbers of women undertaking university degrees (see for example DeBats & Ward, 1998), but they pointed to dispiriting results for the other Australian equity groups, especially those from Aboriginal, rural and poor backgrounds—findings since borne out by the 2008 Bradley Review. The continuing under-representation of students from such backgrounds prevailed despite earlier reforms to the sector, including the abolition of university fees by the Whitlam Labor Government in 1974, and most of which have been made with the aim of increasing equity and widening participation because of the widespread association between education and social as well as economic mobility (DeBats & Ward, 1998; Bletsas & Michell, 2014).

While we welcome past and current efforts to broaden participation of under-represented students at university, we note that similar efforts are not being made to ensure that all equity groups are represented on staff, women being a notable, albeit unachieved, exception. In recent years we have seen warranted and considerable progress with regard to the representation of Indigenous Australians on staff, or at least the topic is now on the agenda; but to our knowledge no Australian university actively seeks to have 25 per cent of its staff come from low SES backgrounds, even as Bradley Review-prompted Federal Government financial incentives from 2009 have seen most institutions actively recruiting more students from that demographic and working towards the representative target of 25 per cent. Nor, as Brook and Michell (2012) have noted, did the gratifying post-Bradley institutional and scholarly attention to recruitment and transition of students from poor and working-class backgrounds call for recognition of the contribution that might be made by academics from similar backgrounds by making their experiences known. Instead there is an invidious silence, likely evidence of the classism that pervades Australian society and therefore universities as well (Bletsas & Michell, 2014). And yet, and inevitably given widening participation programs, there are many Australian academics who do identify as coming from those same demographics now actively been 'mined' for students.

Into the prevailing calm and widespread oppressive view that academics are unquestionably from the middle class, have quietly come a few assorted individual academics writing explicitly about their working-class backgrounds. For example, Bernard Smith's (1984, 2002) memoirs of his childhood in foster care as a ward of the (NSW) State describe how he moved from the extreme margins of social life as an illegitimate child and State ward to the centre, becoming known as 'the father of Australian art history' (Palmer, 2012: 17). Smith benefited from early

widening participation programs, the ‘studentships’ that Georgina Tsolidis in this volume writes about, as well as changes the University of Sydney made in 1945 when they revised entry requirements to the Faculty of Arts, changes which enabled Smith and many returned soldiers to access the university (Smith, 2002: 146). Mark Peel (1995: 1) told something of his working-class story in the introduction to his history of Elizabeth, the ‘northern badlands, the slum’, the working-class suburb in Adelaide where he (and also Heather Fraser in this volume) grew up, ‘a place made poor’ and derided by others. Peter McIlveen (2007: 307) was no stranger to derision either, writing of this experience while exploring the transition to his current status as psychologist and academic. Tara Brabazon (2004: 41) mentions almost in passing the benefits of being in the first generation of her family at university because her parents had the practical skills she needed for building shelves to house her many books. Apart from these and other individual stories (also see Brook, 2011; Michell, 2011; Wilson, 2013), the only collection of self-narratives we are aware of is Mary Ann Bin-Sallik’s assemblage of stories from Aboriginal women (2000). These were pioneering women who, for the most part, were first in their families at university, and who in fact were born in an era when education for Indigenous Australians was actively discouraged. In contrast to Australia, there is a well-established American tradition that has provided a number of such classic collections in the United States (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993; Dews & Law, 1995; Shepard, McMillan, & Tate, 1998; Welsch, 2005).

With this volume we counter the continuing silence with the force and fluency that is *Bread and Roses*, an Australian first, a collection of self-narratives, stories from academics who identify as coming from working-class backgrounds. To paraphrase Tillie Olsen (2003), we wanted to bring together in one volume a collection of stories that would shatter the silence noted by Brook and Michell. We set out to explicitly encourage those from poverty and working-class backgrounds to write about their own experiences, to read stories from others from similar backgrounds, and to encourage students of all backgrounds to do likewise. An edited collection such as this provides an opportunity for ‘people in exile... to use the autobiographic “I”, and tell the stories of their life’ (Steedman, 1986: 16), the personal having long been regarded as ‘suspect in “serious” works of scholarship’ (Dews, 1995: 5), evidence of differences in ‘taste’ that Bourdieu (2010: 4) sees as ‘one of the most vital stakes’ in the struggles between ‘the field of the dominant class and the field of cultural production’ because it is not recognised as produced by social conditions. Indeed, Bob Pease in this collection writes about the difficulties he has encountered when injecting his writing with the active and subjective rather than the passive and formulaic.

In other words, and as Carolyn Law says was achieved with *This Fine Place*, we wanted to build a community of academics from the working class whereby those writing and reading the collection could ‘recognize their own experiences, difficulties, questionings, sufferings’ (Bourdieu, 2004: 113). We received more than double the number of responses we could hope to include in *Bread and Roses*,

evidence that the time is right to build such a community, that others desire to participate in one, and from which can come, as Brook and Michell (2012: 589) have argued, ‘maps for those who might want to travel ... a similar journey themselves.’ As American Renny Christopher (2009) puts it on the dedication page to her book, ‘It’s all about knowing you’re not alone.’ These moments of recognition, moments of no longer feeling alone, are what Bourdieu, the most popular theorist amongst our contributors, might call ‘one of those movements of sympathy obscure to itself that are rooted in the affinity of habitus’ (2004: 27).

Despite the injection of the subjective, in reading the stories of others, and in writing one’s own, attention is drawn away from personal inadequacies and toward the structural forces of class (and gender, and race/ethnicity). That is, the stories are both personal and structural, in that they illustrate the ways in which social forces shape individual lives (Christopher, 2009). As with the American collections analysed by Brook and Michell (2012) we observe the absence of ‘fairy tale’ success stories. Many contributors do not want to claim such a ‘success story’ for themselves at all, but instead question this and the egalitarian myth, in the process highlighting difficulties and injuries inflicted by the class system (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Indeed, seeing academic work, or achieving a PhD, as a success when others are not seen as a success for their work in working-class jobs is ‘classism on top of class structure’ (Christopher, 2009: 140). Rather, writers in our collection, as in the American ones, note the difficulties (as well as the pleasures) they experience, the feelings of ambivalence and displacement, of being torn between previous and current class locations. They provide evidence of what Bourdieu calls a *cleft habitus* (2004: 100) which for him came from working in the upper-class academic environment yet being from ‘low social origin.’ Others also speak of the sense of alienation that can come from moving from one cultural setting to another of which Richard Rodriguez (1987: 78) so eloquently wrote, and yet, ironically, it was this cultural separation from his parents caused by education which eventually enabled Rodriguez to write about the experience. Alienation from one’s childhood culture, and often from a culture which emphasises sharing, togetherness, spontaneity and passion (Rodriguez, 1982; Steedman, 1986; Childers, 2005) rather than individual accomplishment and effort, often results in that culture being rejected. Later reclamation of childhood culture therefore raises the question of whether we are ‘learning’ when we are being educated, or whether we are being assimilated into the middle class (Christopher, 2009). After all, as Tara Brabazon (2002) says: ‘To succeed in formal education is not a question of being gifted, bright or exceptional; it is a matter of being able to repeat dominant assumptions about language, knowledge and value in a way recognised by the dominant order.’ Moreover, while there is a dominant myth that those academics from poor and working-class backgrounds automatically transition (or are assimilated) to the middle class (Brook & Michell, 2012), as a number of writers in this volume discuss, the transition is not that smooth, easy or inevitable.

As the first collection of its kind in Australia, *Bread and Roses* highlights a number of issues that merit further examination. These include the particular and

significant effects of being both working class and female, working class and of immigrant background. For some women it was preferable to identify with one or more of the categories of difference mentioned above than it was to claim a working-class background; for others like May Ngo, being from a migrant background is synonymous with being from a working-class background. It is to be hoped that subsequent works by others may be inspired by the individual examples recounted here to follow up with extensive studies of such experiences. But there is a further aspect of the working-class-to-academic transition that is not specifically addressed, in a comparative sense, in any of the self-narratives collected in this volume, yet is an implied theme in a number of them; it is the issue of *generations*—that is, *when* the individual entered the academy, and the significance of timing in relation to access.

In 1988 John Dawkins, the Minister for Employment, Education and Training in the Labor government of Bob Hawke, set in place the ‘Unified National System’ of tertiary education institutions, which aimed to amalgamate the dual post-secondary structure comprising the universities, so called, and the colleges of advanced education (CAE) that included the major technical colleges such as Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) as well as a large number of lesser institutions with similar industry and trade connections (Bessant, 2002). Ironically given later changes, CAEs had initially been established in 1967 at the recommendation of the Martin Committee in part to solve the problem of the high dropout and failure rates of first-year students who were ill-prepared for university. The CAEs would educate future teachers, a profession then in demand, and the universities could focus on their research programs and on admitting the academic elite (Sherington & Forsyth, 2012). Dawkins’ ‘reforms’ of the sector, twenty years on, arose in large part from a doctrinaire Labor preoccupation with perceived inequities in the tertiary sector based in the nature and managerial structure of the universities, which were seen as not only elitist bastions of intellectual class-privilege, but also venues of financial wastage. The CAEs, by comparison, were more acceptable ideologically as well as being structured on ‘managerialist’ lines that supposedly ensured far greater economic efficiencies (Bessant, 2002).

At a stroke, the changes that came to be known as the ‘Dawkins reforms’ effectively levelled the playing field, as it were, in two ways: they bestowed on the CAEs the right to rebadge as ‘universities’ without changing anything about their internal structure, intellectual culture, teaching and research priorities, or managerial style. Many of these institutions duly renamed themselves accordingly. This might not in itself have been of great consequence, beyond devaluing in many eyes the prestige associated with the label ‘university’, but for the other strand of Dawkins’ changes, whereby the administration of the entire tertiary sector, including the institutions’ internal arrangements, was to reflect the CAEs’ ‘top-down’ managerialist culture (Bessant, 2002).

This paradigm shift—it was nothing less—in Australian universities’ financial and administrative culture led, over the subsequent decade, to the conditions prevailing today for academics, and justifies reference, when discussing academic narratives as

this book does, to ‘pre-Dawkins’ or ‘post-Dawkins’. Those who entered the academy prior to the late 1980s enjoyed a degree of intellectual freedom—that is, freedom to teach, research, and/or simply *think* (80)—that is little more than a distant memory in the modern academic ambience of fully quantifiable research and educational outcomes, increasing workloads and output accountability (Wilson, 2015; Wilson et al., 2010).

When speaking of long academic careers still under way or only recently ended, as a number of our authors do, the *pre*-Dawkins era may be deemed to have begun in the decade after the Second World War. It can be broadly divided into two phases: the period dominated from the late 1940s to the early 1970s by the conservative governments of Robert Menzies and his successors; and the period begun in 1972 with the election of Gough Whitlam’s reformist Labor Government.

Menzies, a strongly education-oriented prime minister and a staunch advocate of academic freedom and merit-based opportunity (within the context of an undeniably elitist tertiary system), inherited and built upon a university funding model begun by his Labor predecessors aimed at improving facilities, infrastructure and access at the tertiary level (Bessant, 2006). In the early 1960s he expanded the scheme to include secondary education, in the form of the Commonwealth scholarship scheme, which gave unprecedented numbers of capable students previously shut out by economic circumstances the opportunity to progress to tertiary education (Bessant, 2006), but which also gave rise to concern about student retention; hence the advent of the CAEs.

A number of the most senior generation of academics contributing to our collection acknowledge that their access to university rested upon the winning of Commonwealth scholarships. Whatever their respective experiences once in the academy, and however their working-class backgrounds coloured their career trajectories, the key factor in the beginning was getting through the university doors in the first place. The universities they entered in those days were exemplars of the traditional ‘elitist’ model, and by and large those working-class students who did gain access fitted that model in terms of intellectual potential—which is not to say they were all personally comfortable in that fit, nor that they endorsed such elitism. It remains a fact, however, that they were exceptional among their socio-economic peers (and hence often isolated among their fellow-university students); the Commonwealth scholarship scheme actually benefitted relatively few in the working class, as most young people in that stratum did not complete secondary school.

In early 1974, after a busy first year in government in which federal aid to secondary schools was increased, Gough Whitlam implemented a key policy commitment and abolished tertiary fees altogether. Access to a university education was suddenly free for anyone who satisfactorily completed secondary school, and the Commonwealth scholarship scheme became redundant. Whitlam’s reform undoubtedly improved university access for significantly more working-class students than had the Commonwealth scholarships, as secondary retention rates had been rising since the early 1960s; but still, most of those working-class aspirants

taking advantage of the new freedom from fees went into the CAEs. Once again, it may be said that working-class entrants to university still made up an ‘elite’ minority of their own, and in many cases (as recounted by a number of our authors) also experienced isolation and alienation due to their backgrounds.

The academic landscape post-Dawkins is characterised by two key factors: the proliferation of institutions calling themselves ‘universities’ and the top-down imposition of a ‘free-market’ approach to institutional governance, to teaching, and to research. This ‘corporate’ approach has resulted in a competitive drive for education ‘customers’—that is, students—and an emphasis among research-oriented institutions on funding-attractors—that is, grants—which both channels the work of researchers into prescribed areas with definable and quantifiable outcomes, and erodes collegiality within and between institutions competing for the same limited pool of resources.

This ‘corporatisation’ has over the past two decades led inexorably to a new elitism among Australia’s universities, based essentially on institutional wealth and the capacity of academic staff to generate it. An ensnaring downward spiral can overtake those universities lacking the resources and/or prestige (usually resulting from longevity and the old binary system) needed to compete on such terms, resulting in them becoming even less competitive and hence ever-poorer. Such ‘lesser’ institutions tend to be found in regional areas and among the newer universities in traditionally working-class localities.

The prevailing paradox inherent in this situation is that in an era of unprecedented access to higher education for students of working-class backgrounds, the issue is no longer whether one can go to university, but *which* university one attends. With demand for entry to the prestigious universities at an all-time high, it is now at least as difficult as it ever was for the majority of school-leavers from low socio-economic backgrounds to gain places in elite institutions.

The dynamic interrelationship of class and location of origin presents in many of the book’s narratives. As Loic Wacquant has argued (1997), location defines its residents, their social networks and ultimately their opportunities, so that a class doesn’t so much ‘create’ the location and its characteristics as much as the reverse: the location creates the class. For many of our authors, locational disadvantage has been an additional stumbling block when it comes to attending university, but for our small number of authors from rural and regional centres, it presents as a particularly acute problem. For some, it is an ongoing struggle. Choosing education and career over one’s place of ‘belonging’ is a burden just as it is for those many students who must leave their homes and families to attend university. Sometimes the loss of community is overlain with a sense of guilt at having been lucky enough to get out, while others are left behind.

Our authors from rural and regional backgrounds mostly grew up in a period of economic decline in these centres. Increasing corporate domination of agriculture, globalisation and de-industrialisation from the 1980s contributed to a growing disparity of income between rural/regional and metropolitan Australians so that by

the late 1990s, workers within these centres were earning on average 24 per cent less than metropolitan Australians, and of the thirty-seven poorest electorates in Australia, thirty-three were in rural and regional areas. Rural and regional Australians still fare worst on all social and economic indicators (Saunders & Wong, 2014). The rural youth suicide rates remain alarmingly high, and at the time that our rural and regional contributors were leaving home to attend University, the rates for young men aged between fifteen and twenty-four years were fifty times higher than for their metropolitan equivalents. The research shows that causes are linked to rising rural unemployment, declining populations, the disintegration of rural communities, lack of social supports, economic challenges to the male role of breadwinner, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair (Cheers & Clarke, 2003).

A recent survey of rural and regional students from years 10–13 reveals that getting to university means getting out (Robinson, 2012), but it remains a difficult hurdle to jump. Research consistently reveals the specific disadvantages that rural and regional students must overcome to gain an equal footing with students in metropolitan areas when they begin their first year of university. Rural and regional areas have difficulty attracting, retaining and training teachers, which often leads to poor educational outcomes for students. Students also experience reduced subject options in their high school years, leading to limited degree choices (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009: 57). Coupled with a reduced quality of education is a prevailing lack of cultural acceptance or encouragement of tertiary education. The sluggish economies within these regions may only present students with a limited range of career role-models, and for that reason university education may appear unattractive or unnecessary (Alloway & Dalley-Trim, 2009).

The recent spread of universities into large regional centres can also be seen as beneficial for rural and regional students, offering options close to home or within a similar rural/regional setting. As discussed above, the 2009 Federal Labor Government, prompted by the Bradley Review, set equity targets to increase the participation of under-represented groups within the Higher Education sector, not only low SES students, but also rural and regional students and Indigenous students. Regional universities were seen as potential vehicles for addressing the education needs of all three groups, but they often replicate the disadvantages associated with rural and regional high-school education. The limited courses offered at these institutions tend to be focused at the lower end of the professional scale: nursing, social work and teaching courses—in which women are numerically dominant—now proliferate in the educational landscape and reinforce intergenerational low earnings (Robinson, 2012). Rather than completely eliminate the binary system which had existed until the Dawkins reforms, it seems that CAEs have effectively been transplanted to regional areas.

Complexities of class and other intersectionalities, including rurality, are explored in *Bread & Roses*, and thus the collection promises to stimulate a wide and deep conversation about inequities in the university sector as well as the broader Australian community. The book is divided into four parts.

The theme which unifies the seven chapters in Part One is the problematic nature of identity as one moves from the working class into the middle-class academic environment, further complicated for some contributors by intersections of ethnicity and gender. In Part Two, Alternative Pathways are stories in which the focus is on coming to higher education after a period in the workforce and disenchantment with that alternative to higher education. The small, but important, Part Three illuminates the particularities of being not only first in family at university, but also from a rural background. And the focus in the final Part Four is the academic working environment where some contributors describe disconcerting encounters with the remnants of tradition, elitism and disparagement of the working class as well as the pleasures of academic life.

‘From little things big things grow’ as Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody wrote in 1991. We hope that *Bread and Roses* will be the beginning of a vocal community of Australian working-class academics proudly (re)claiming their heritage, supporting students from similar backgrounds, and continuing to transform the university sector.

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PART 1
IDENTITY

MAY NGO

1. THE ‘C’ WORD

Class, Migrants and Academia

The city I live in now, Paris, is a city of bakeries. The baguette is as much an icon as the Eiffel Tower and the smell of freshly baked bread is one of the pleasures of this city. Walking along the streets you’ll find bakeries within metres of one another, each servicing the needs of local residents for bread, patisseries and other baked goods. In summer, as Parisians leave for their *vacances* (holidays) and Paris nearly shuts down, the local mayor’s office publishes a list of which local bakeries will be open and when, making sure locals don’t suffer bread deprivation while the bakers are away on holiday.

Used to white sliced bread in Australia, I never knew bread could be so good or so various. You have the ‘standard’ baguette, but also traditional baguettes, seeded baguettes, walnut bread, focaccia and cheese sticks. And the patisseries, aah, who can forget the patisseries! In such a visually conscious city, you won’t find things simply slapped together with no regard for aesthetics; like everything else here, how it looks is most important: raspberry tarts, *macarons*, chocolate *éclairs*, puff-pastry cream cakes, flan, lemon meringue tarts, croissants, *pain au chocolat*; an endless range all carefully decorated and arranged in the window displays. Beautifully made patisseries with always that extra bit of flourish, whether it’s a carefully placed raspberry or their bakery logo done in tiny perfect letters in icing; one can easily get lost in the beauty of it all.

It’s funny that I should be living in a city of bakeries; each time I step into a bakery it brings up so many associations for me. The bakeries in the city trace old memories of the family bakery that my siblings and I grew up in, the bakery my family had for over ten years in Sydney in a period when for some reason many migrant families, particularly Vietnamese, opened up bakeries across western Sydney. My family’s bakery would never be able to compete with the ones over here in Paris; I doubt if that many bakeries in Australia could – we simply don’t have the same level of love and passion for bread and patisseries they do here. Instead, my family’s Asian-Australian version had: lamingtons, meringues, donuts, apple turnovers, meat pies, sausage rolls, ‘French’ stick, round rolls, long rolls and, of course, white sliced bread. At one point we even tried selling Vietnamese pork rolls (*banh mi thit*); themselves a leftover from French colonial influence: a bread roll with paté, processed pork slices, shredded carrots and shallots.