

Working-Class Perspectives

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A Punishment with No End: The Journey of a Working-Class Criminal into Academia

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We call ourselves the flower pot kids after the floral themed street names the local council assigned in a vain if well-meaning attempt to brighten up an otherwise dreary area. The council-owned social housing consisted of tattered prefabricated buildings from the very early post-war period in the UK. I recently found myself with some other flower pot kids reminiscing about days gone by and the fates of our peers. We also considered the progress that we had made in life despite our disadvantages. One of my friends looked at me and said, “You’ve not done too bad for yourself, Ed. You’ve done yourself proud”. In many ways he is right, but it has come at a cost.

I grew up in a working-class town in Essex in the early 1980s where money was tight. I felt the stress and strain my parents were under, a shared experience among my friends and neighbours. But I was good at sport, especially cricket, and that won me a place at a grammar school in a neighbouring borough. But I was under no illusions why I was there. While my parents and I wanted me to be there, it put all of us under immense stress and strain — hidden injuries of class. The school was full of what I saw as affluent kids, and the pressure to compete and keep up materially was unbearable. When we couldn’t, that’s was when the othering came in to play. I was the outsider and constantly reminded of it.

So from a young age I wanted to escape the working-class world that I had grown up in. My route out was crime — drugs, violence, and all the other unpleasantness that followed. I was sentenced to 16 years in prison. Fear motivated my desire for education — the fear that unless I did something to improve my prospects, I would face a lifetime of crime and prison. Education helped me discover my passion , through a degree in Criminology and Psychology, followed by a master’s degree — all while incarcerated. I’m now a full-time PhD student on a scholarship and an Assistant Lecturer.

However, it was and still is a different fear that threatened my rehabilitation and my career in education: the fear others have of me. As a criminal man from a working-class background, I am a walking manifestation of the entanglement of welfare, crime, class, and society. The problem may be societal, but it casts a stain on my character and my being. The othering that I experienced in my youth because of my class background is replicated in adulthood as a working-class ex-prisoner/offender.

My working-class peers, whether fellow prisoners or prison officers, were unsupportive of my educational aspirations whilst I was in prison. Prison officers

feared that I would use my newfound knowledge to somehow 'game the system' for my benefit. More punitive staff members resented me attending university, believing that someone in prison shouldn't be allowed the 'luxury' of an education. A governor spoke of how some staff resented my opportunity because they were stuck in a dead-end civil service job until their pensions. I was being allowed to go from prison, where I should be punished, to university and then into secure employment with significantly better wage than they earned. Perhaps naively, I genuinely thought that people would support my progression and success, but instead I was feared and resented.

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Both in prison and after, my criminal peers and childhood friends often question my identity, suggesting I'm not being true to myself or my people. I'm still the man who shares values, memories, experiences, and culture with those very people, but they see me as the working-class kid from Essex masquerading as someone he is not, someone from a different class and too good for them these days! This couldn't be any further from the truth, but the scornful comments sting.

When I left prison, I hoped that this would all be a thing of the past, yet the stigma of both my criminal past *and* my class follows me into my new workplace. I again find myself dehumanised, seen as a 'risk' that needs to be managed and controlled by people with no commensurate knowledge or background in offender risk management. I have to justify that I am no threat to staff or students or the reputation of my employers. My University has risk assessed me, fearing a backlash in the tabloid press if parents hear that their children are being taught by an ex-offender. This is despite the prison service, probation, and numerous police assessments over the years that judged me as not presenting a threat. This didn't stop the University from placing restrictions on my teaching duties. But there is something else going on, and that is about class. I feel have to justify my existence, my behaviours and actions in the workplace. I can't participate in work activities the way I would like to. I can't assert myself or speak in a tone that feels appropriate for the situation for fear that my past may influence people's perceptions of me. I have to present a 'dumbed down' version of myself, a shadow. I live under the microscope every day, a victim of my past. The same othered kid from the working-class background as a child has evolved into the othered man in adulthood.

What I cannot help but feel is the 'violence of class'. The othering that has dogged my entire life due to my class has acted as the catalyst for both the good but more profoundly the bad that I have perpetrated and experienced in my life. Class has underpinned my criminality and its injurious nature complicates my progression from that identity in the present day. Justice was served when I was sentenced to imprisonment, yet injustice punctuates my life since my release.