Class Background, Current Class Position, and Race in Philosophy of Education: Comments on Liz Jackson's "Becoming Classy"

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In her article, Liz Jackson calls attention to the relative paucity of work in philosophy of education on class as an identity and a social position, compared especially to race, but also to gender, sexual orientation, and gender presentation. She insightfully characterizes as the "kitchen sink approach"[1] a common way that class shows up in lists of these categories of difference, where class might be acknowledged but so minimally that it is not really discussed. Liz argues that while class is, like the others, a category of advantage and disadvantage, it bears significant disanalogies with, in particular, race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Liz gives the example of what she calls "passing," drawing from its more familiar use in the race situation, but applying in the class situation to someone who changes their class position. She notes that the ideology of meritocracy places positive value on moving up out of a disadvantaged class position to a more advantaged one, and that this is different from the racial case. Liz notes two costs to this class-based passing or to the meritocracy ideology that underpins it or underpins its sociocultural meaning. One is that it implies that the person who does not leave their disadvantaged situation for a higher and different class status is to be looked down upon as defective in some way, for example lazy, stupid, lacking in ambition. I think this ideology has indeed done a tremendous amount of damage, not only in making millions of people feel badly about themselves when they shouldn't, but also making it harder for them to identify the class-structural barriers to living a good life and inhibiting class-based solidarity to collective action in struggling to overcome these barriers.

The second cost is that the poor person who, like Liz herself, leaves one class position for a higher one, is often seen as losing the authority to speak

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about and certainly for people in her original disadvantaged class position. Liz experiences this sense of challenged authority herself and she links this challenged authority to the difficulty she feels in speaking about class disadvantage in educational philosophy.

I wondered if Liz would feel that distinguishing between *class background* and *current class position* might be at least partly helpful in this difficulty. Class background is much more analogous to race than is current class position. You can never abandon your class background; no matter what happens to you later in life, you always have the same background you grew up in. What you might be able to do is to give the impression, by your comportment or other expressive indicators, that you have a higher class background than you actually do. Doing so would be somewhat analogous to the black person who is able, because of their phenotype, to pass as white, although a disanalogy is that in the race case the false impression is not given by behavior but merely by physical characteristics (although behavior can affect the ability to succeed in passing). But *current* class position is completely different, in that one could have arrived at one's current class position by various routes, including both upward and downward class mobility in relation to one's class background. It is current class position, not class background, that is the subject of meritocracy, and the ideology of meritocracy overstates the degree to which current class position can be severed from class background, that is, understates the class-structural barriers to mobility. Nevertheless, current class position is variable in a way that class background is not.

With this distinction cannot we say that a currently middle class person from a poor background can speak to what it was like to have that background, from a position of acknowledgment that one no longer occupies the position one did in one's family upbringing?[2] To be sure, this is not the same as speaking about poverty *as a currently poor person*, and I think Liz would think it important to have voices of currently poor people as part of the conversation about poverty, and poverty and education. Nevertheless, the ability to speak from experiences in one's background which one has subsequently moved quite far from can be given authority that recognizes that distinction between class background and

current class position.

Liz has some hesitancy in using her own experience to challenge the standard way that "privilege" is parlayed in educational discourse that focuses on racial injustice, in part because of the epistemic challenge just mentioned. I think that challenge very much needs to be made. Not all white students are middle class, and the ones who aren't—my own students at UMassBoston and the students like herself whom Liz went to college with at Portland State University—are not privileged in the ways that white middle class students are privileged. Indeed, the status of an undergraduate student does not fit cleanly into my distinction between class background and current class status; it is in between, probably a stepping stone to a new class position but possibly not. I was struck by Liz's saying that she became middle class only when she went to the University of Cambridge for her Masters, not when she was a student at Portland State. I don't necessarily want to read anything into that, but many of my own students will not make it out of the working class, even if they do graduate, though their BA will certainly improve their occupational chances. None of this is to deny that at any class position, blacks are generally disadvantaged in many respects compared to whites. Class and race are distinct though interlocking forms of advantage and disadvantage.

I don't think Liz is saying that the *importance* of class is dependent on the disanalogies with the other social categories, but only that if we use these more frequently invoked categories, we will miss some important distinctive characteristics of class.

In her analysis, Liz focuses on the white poor, because this is the group that gets overlooked in the framing of the common elision of white with "middle class," counterposed to blacks as a class-unmarked group. But I wondered what Liz thought about the black poor, and perhaps the black working class, in relation to the white poor and working class. In my experience at my university teaching many students of working class and poor backgrounds (though considerably fewer since my university followed the national trend of states' defunding their public universities and thus offloading expenses of attending it to the students and their families), there is a good deal of shared class con-

sciousness among these different groups, though in no way at the expense of recognizing the many asymmetries between whites and non-whites. How does recognizing class differences within the black group enrich the power of class as an analytic category in education? Although Liz is right that philosophy of education may not pay attention to class and in particular to the confluence of class and race, the same cannot be said of social science research on race and education, where class factors are assumed and shown to play a crucial part in the educational fates of black students[3]. Indeed, the character of poverty differs between blacks and whites, as it is primarily an urban issue for blacks and a rural one for whites, as it was in Liz's family. And this results in a greater degree of concentrated neighborhood poverty for blacks, which has been established as a disadvantaging variable distinct from individual household poverty.

Nevertheless I would not want our theorizing about race and class to squeeze out possibilities of mutual affiliation and class-based political and social bonding and alliance between working class and poor blacks and whites. So I am very supportive of Liz's plea for greater attention to class issues in education, for several distinct reasons.

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1 Liz Jackson, "Becoming Classy: In Search of Class Theory in Philosophy of Education," in *Philosophy and Education Society 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 There are really two different discourses about "middle class" in American life, one an extremely broad category that very much includes many members of the working class ("good middle class jobs" are sometimes understood paradigmatically as union-protected or working class jobs with decent wages and conditions), and another, much more common in philosophy, in which it *differs* from working class and carries a stronger implication of advantage and privilege.

3 Just one example of class-awareness along with race in social science—the canon-defining collection, R. Murnane and G. Duncan, eds., *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances* (New York, NY: Russell Sage, 2011).