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Citation:

MORRISON, Andrew (2014). Hegemony through responsabilisation : getting working-class students into higher education in the United Kingdom. *Power and Education*, 6 (2), 118-129. [Article]

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Hegemony through Responsibilisation: Getting Working-Class Students into Higher Education in the UK

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Abstract: *This article examines the role of the New Labour governments' agenda for widening participation in higher education as a form of responsibilising discourse of working-class young people. Under the New Labour administrations of 1997—2010, a concerted attempt was made to attract working-class students into higher education through promotional initiatives such as the Aimhigher programme. Drawing from Raymond Williams' discussion of hegemony and also from Nikolas Rose's concept of the 'enterprising self', this article examines three explanatory/promotional documents from the Aimhigher programme aimed at working-class young people and their parents. The documents are analysed as materialisations of a powerfully hegemonic discourse of 'responsibilisation' towards participation in higher education. The article concludes with a discussion of the ways in which the widening access agenda has shifted since the coalition government came to power in 2010.*

Introduction

The principal focus of this article is an examination of how the widening participation agenda for higher education of the UK's New Labour administrations of 1997—2010 functioned as a form of responsibilising discourse of working-class young people. Under the three New Labour administrations, the attempt to attract working-class students into higher education formed part of a wider policy direction for the sector based around the twin objectives of enhanced international economic competitiveness and broader social inclusion. This agenda has had some considerable success in expanding absolute numbers of working-class students although their relative proportions within an expanded sector remain low, particularly within 'high-status' institutions (Crawford, 2012). In the following section, I shall consider the HE widening participation (WP) agenda of the New Labour administrations. Following this, I

shall draw from both Nikolas Rose's concept of the 'enterprising self' and Raymond Williams' discussion of hegemony to analyse three explanatory/promotional documents aimed at working-class young people and their parents from Aimhigher, New Labour's flagship programme for widening participation in higher education. It will be argued that these documents form part of a powerfully hegemonic discourse of 'responsibilisation' towards participation in higher education which (while it may offer some benefits to both participating individuals and to society) also carries worrying overtones of social coercion.

New Labour: higher education, the economy and social inclusion

To understand New Labour's widening participation agenda, we need to understand something of its historical background. Working-class young people have always gone on to higher education in some numbers. Prior to the great expansion of the UK's higher education sector in the mid-1960s, their numbers (particularly of female students) were certainly few, leading Stuart (2012) to call them 'a rare breed'. The HE sector expanded significantly under the Labour administration of Harold Wilson, 1964—1970, following publication of the Robbins Report into higher education in 1963. For Stuart (2012) the period of the 1960s—1970s was a 'golden era' of funded institutional expansion and of state financial support for working-class students. However, as Stuart (2012, p.54) also points out, the growth of higher education in this period did not particularly aim to draw more working-class students into the sector but was, rather, premised upon a more general belief in meritocracy. As a consequence, at the end of the 1980s Britain enjoyed the dubious distinction of having one of the lowest proportions among European countries of working-class students enrolled on higher education courses (Chitty, 2009, p.203).

As a result of continued growth in the late 1980s and early 1990s, participation had already reached 'mass' levels (defined as a 20% threshold) by the early 1990s, although this was largely unplanned and demand-driven. By contrast, expansion under New Labour was to be target-driven, led by the goal of achieving a 50% participation rate. A central aim of the 50% target was to not simply increase the absolute numbers of students, but also to diversify the social base of the student cohort by attracting students with no previous tradition of higher education within their families. What became known as the 'widening participation' agenda became central to the overall expansion of the HE sector because of the way it sat at the nexus of two of New Labour's key concerns: national economic competitiveness and social inclusion.

If we consider the first of these two concerns, New Labour's expansionist plans for the HE sector were qualitatively different from those of past governments, and particularly those of the immediately previous Conservative administrations, in the way that they articulated with, and also reflected, a particular set of geo-political assumptions. As Jones (2003, p.148) argues, New Labour felt comfortable with the political discourse of globalisation and accepted its economic, cultural and social implications much more than the Conservative party which was inhibited in some respects by its nationalist and Europhobic tendencies. Thus, education was positioned firmly as a tool for national economic growth within the context of a globalised world of intense competition in which knowledge and an educated workforce were the new key drivers of future prosperity (Lauder et al. p.2012). With regard to the second concern, here again New Labour differed markedly from the previous Conservative governments in its view of the ameliorative powers of education in relation to social inequalities. As Reay (2008, p.644) observes, Tony Blair's vision of education was a direct inversion of Bernstein's famous dictum that 'education cannot compensate for society'; rather, under New Labour the function of education was to serve as a form of panacea for

class inequalities (Taylor, 2009). Of course, New Labour's agenda for higher education needs to be viewed within its wider international context. Internationally, participation in tertiary level education nearly quadrupled in the period 1970—2000, driven largely by national governments' concerns to respond to the pressures of globalisation and increased economic competition (Clancy & Goastelle 2007, p.136). Furthermore, although higher education is not formally a competency of the European Union (of which the UK is a member), New Labour's twin concerns of competitiveness and social justice were both reflected and, to some extent, framed by wider EU policy discourse on higher education, much of it driven by the European Commission (Keeling, 2006).

The relative massification of higher education which took place under New Labour has not, however, brought about greater educational equality. Instead, the growth of the sector has led to a marked degree of hierarchisation. The previous binary divide between universities and polytechnics has been supplanted by a complex, highly differentiated sector that both reflects and perpetuates wider inequalities of class and, to some extent, 'race'. Research indicates that for many working-class and minority ethnic students, not all forms of H.E and not all institutions are considered possible or reasonable. For example, Reay et al (2001) have demonstrated that both White and minority ethnic working-class students often have to negotiate complex cultural and psycho-social barriers, and a sense of their classed 'place' within a highly stratified H.E system may often be an important constraint upon choice (Reay et al. 2001, p.864).

The Aimhigher initiative, the focus of this present article, did not particularly attempt to address these sorts of issues related to a differentiated, hierarchised system; rather, as I shall discuss, its aim was to foster a general sense of aspiration for HE among traditionally under-represented groups. In this respect, it formed part of a changed policy landscape under New Labour which saw a shift from a traditional *denial* (or, at best, neglect) of opportunities for

working-class access to higher education to a position whereby the state appeared to be actively trying to *attract* more working-class young people into the sector. In other words, the traditionally low levels of working-class participation in higher education in the UK became a problematic of government. Although this shift did not entirely begin under New Labour, under their policies it certainly found its most concrete expression in the form of recruitment targets and in measures such as Aimhigher. How are we to theorise this shift? Here, I believe that we may usefully turn to Nikolas Rose's (1992) work on the 'enterprising self'.

Responsibilisation

For Rose (1992), contemporary society accords a vital political value to a particular image of what it means to be a person: the 'enterprising self'—a subjective being who aspires to autonomy, interprets its reality in terms of individual responsibility and who shapes its life through acts of choice. Crucially, this conception of an autonomous, 'responsibilised' individual goes beyond the particular enterprise rhetorics of Thatcherism or New Labour. Instead, Rose (1992) argues, these are new ways of thinking, judging and acting upon selves which are not simply private matters; rather, they are intimately linked to the ways in which persons now feature in the political vocabulary and governance of advanced liberal democracies. Rose (1992) employs a Foucauldian framework of 'governmentality' to explore this new form of relationship. From this perspective, the neo-liberal vocabulary of enterprise is seen to link political rhetoric and regulatory moral technologies of governance to the self-directing capacities of subjects themselves. And this is the crux of Rose's (1992) argument: that we should not dichotomise between individual autonomy and political power. Rather, governing in a liberal democratic way requires governing through individuals' freedoms and aspirations, and not despite them, and thus in this way the autonomy of the self may be

viewed as one of the objectives and instruments of modern governmentality. Rose (1992) goes on to argue that this is made possible by the growth and reach of a plethora of discourses, practices and techniques, all of which are underpinned by presumptions of self ‘autonomization’ and ‘responsibilisation’—“*the instilling of a reflexive hermeneutics that will afford self-knowledge and self-mastery*” (1992, p.149).

Rose’s (1992) discussion of the enterprising self and of responsibilisation is of value for the way in which it undoubtedly captures something of the intense self-reflexivity *required* of individuals within contemporary society—something which it shares with Beck’s (1992) account of the ‘reflexive self’. However, this still leaves the question of how we are to undertake a *critical* analysis of responsibilisation. Rose himself is very clear that critics who argue that the rhetoric of enterprise is a simple capitalist illusion designed to mask a real lack of choice offer a facile analysis (1992, p.146). For Rose (1992), such a criticism would be to miss the salient point: that the language of enterprise is simply a particular (and possibly transitory) mode of articulating more deeply-held ethical presuppositions about the self. This latter point is true; nevertheless, Rose’s (1992) acceptance of the Foucauldian conception of power relations raises its own questions. For Foucault (as Rose notes approvingly), power is not located in people or organisations as conceived of in the traditional sociological binaries of ‘state’ and ‘private life’ or domination-subordination. Rather, power, “*...is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere...because it comes from everywhere*” (Foucault, 1998, p.93). As such, it traverses *all* social practices and is ultimately constitutive of our very subjectivities through the exercise of certain strategies and procedures of regulation.

Such a conception of power raises epistemological issues. As Eagleton (1991, p.47) asks, given the all-enveloping grip of Foucauldian power on our consciousness, what is ‘left over’ of our subjectivities to comprehend power and to resist it? Certainly, for Foucault (1998,

p.95), on the one hand power implies resistance, but on the other we are always 'inside' power and thus can never 'escape' it. In Eagleton's view (1991, p.47) this represents an unsatisfactory dilemma within Foucault's work and (I would add) such a criticism would extend to Rose's (1992) analysis of the role of power relations in the constitution of the enterprising self. For this reason, therefore, I believe that Rose's (1992) concept of responsibilisation may usefully be complemented with an analysis grounded in Raymond Williams' work on hegemony.

Hegemony

Raymond Williams' discussions of hegemony draw from, but also develop, the work of Gramsci. Gramsci uses the term to signify the ways in which a ruling class attempts to persuade the other social classes to accept its moral, political and cultural values as *the* values of the society in general. Democratic governance requires that the ruling classes maintain power chiefly through consent rather than coercion, and this is to be achieved through what Gramsci terms 'civil society': social institutions located between the state and the economy and including organisations such as the media, the churches and the education system. Raymond Williams draws explicitly on Gramsci in his discussion of 'modes of incorporation'. For Williams, modes of incorporation refer to the "real social process" on which an "effective and dominant culture" depends, and they are mediated by such agencies as the education system (Williams, 2005, pp.38-9). Within a modern, apparently democratic capitalist society there exists a dense, highly complex layer of such institutions which serve to create a 'common sense' view of the world through the depth of the cultural and social penetration they achieve.

For Williams, the extent of such cultural penetration means that hegemony is always experienced as a ‘lived’ habitual process which “...constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway...” (Williams, 2005, p.37). It is not, however, absolute. Indeed, Williams makes clear that hegemonic power is not a monolithic singular entity, but will instead have its own complex internal structures which have to be continually renewed and defended and which can, in some respects, be subject to modification (Williams, 2005, p.38). Johnson (1998) takes up this point and emphasises the contested nature of hegemonic cultural formations in arguing that hegemony is *not* the saturation of dominant ideology, and that gaining consent is not the same as agreement. Instead, Johnson (1998, p.90) argues:

“...the hegemonic is that for which ‘there is no alternative’. Hegemonic discourses operate in part by attacking, disorganising, nullifying or marginalising other ways of living, which, locally, may be quite developed.”

Here, the concept of hegemony takes us beyond the all-encompassing nature of Foucauldian power that underwrites Rose’s (1992) discussion of responsibilisation, and instead allows for an understanding of the possibility of agency and of resistance to dominant discourses. It thus opens up epistemological possibilities which complement the insights offered by Rose’s (1992) theory of responsibilisation. Having discussed the theoretical framework for the study, I shall now discuss the Aimhigher programme from which the three documents were drawn.

Aim Higher

Aimhigher began in 2004 and was supported by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS), in conjunction with the higher education funding councils. The aim of the programme was “*to widen participation in higher education (HE) by raising HE awareness, aspirations and attainment among young people from under-represented groups*” (www.Aimhigher.ac.uk). This was to be achieved through partnerships between schools, further education colleges, HEIs (higher education institutions) and local authorities. Aimhigher activities included summer schools, visits to HEI campuses and the provision of information, advice and guidance (IAG). The originality of the programme, and the rationale for this article’s focus upon the initiative, lies in the fact that while some HEIs may have previously engaged in access work, Aimhigher represented the first concerted national-level programme to try to make HE more accessible to traditionally under-represented groups.

My focus in this article is upon the IAG work of Aimhigher. In particular, I shall discuss three publications that were available as PDF documents on the websites of Aimhigher and also of the DBIS from 2009: *Help your child into Higher Education*, a parents’ guide to higher education; *Your future Your choice*, a guide for young people aged 16 and over; *Don’t stop doing what you love*, a guide for school pupils aged 14. These documents were selected from a total of four IAG documents available from the same websites. The other document was a publication aimed at mature students. It was decided not to include this publication for discussion within this article as the principal target group for Aimhigher was 18-19 year-old school-leavers (Passy, 2012). All three documents indicate that they were updated in September 2009 and thus were the most current publications prior to the ending of Aimhigher.

Critical Discourse Analysis

As this paper will examine the AimHigher documents as materialisations of a discourse of responsibilisation, there remains the question of how we are to understand what we mean by discourse and its relation to power structures. My reading of the term is informed broadly by critical discourse analysis (CDA). Thus, following Fairclough (2001a: 123) discourses carry ideological content, being “...*diverse representations of social life which are inherently positioned—differently positioned social actors ‘see’ and represent social life in different ways, different discourses*”. In my understanding, discourse is restricted to the production of meaning through language (Wetherell, Taylor & Yates 2001, p.3). This distinguishes the concept discourse from a broader understanding of communication for which Fairclough (2001a, p.122) reserves the term semiosis. Semiosis (including discourses) is “...*an irreducible part of material social processes*” and therefore features in representations of social practices (2001a, p.122). Fairclough (2001a, p.124) argues further that networked social practices constitute a social order. The semiotic aspect of a social order is termed an ‘order of discourse’, that is, the way diverse genres (distinctive ways of producing social life, e.g., conversations, interviews, advertisements) and discourses are networked and interlaced together. Because of their association with dominant groups, some discourses and genres will gain dominance over others and become accepted as ‘mainstream’.

This paper will draw upon elements of critical discourse analysis to analyse the three Aimhigher documents as ‘texts’ (a term encompassing all forms of semiotic activity, including written texts). In the following sections, I will focus upon an analysis of the genre, readership and discourse of the texts.

Genre and Readership

One of the most striking features of all three documents is the extent to which they are ‘hybrid’ texts that mix different genres. To some degree, this should be of no surprise since, as Fairclough (2001b, p.241) notes, the working assumption is that all texts mix different genres and discourses. The three documents are hybrids of traditional factually-based IAG and promotional genres, although the balance between the two varies across the three documents. The documents *Your future your choice*, for young people aged 16 and over, and *Help your child into Higher Education*, a parents’ guide to higher education share the greatest similarities. Both contain elements we would expect to see in traditional IAG: the different routes into higher education and the types of qualifications typically accepted by HEIs; the types of qualifications offered by HEIs; potential career outcomes; information on finances. Most of this information is presented in tabular form and the language is descriptive and informational in tone.

However, these two documents are essentially promotional rather than informational. The most obviously promotional sections of each document are the introductory page (with its endorsement of the value of HE qualifications from the CEO of a major company in highlighted text), the two case studies of HE students, and the sections describing student life—titled “What will it be like?” in *Your future your choice* and “What is student life like?” in *Help your child into Higher Education*. These sections expressly aim to sell higher education to their respective readerships through exhortative language in which HE is presented as “A *once-in-a-lifetime experience*” (*Your future your choice* p.18). Moreover, even the more descriptive IAG sections in these documents are also interlaced with more promotional and exhortative language. For example, in the section on finances (page 11), *Help your child into Higher Education* reassures parents that student loans are, “...likely to be

the cheapest form of borrowing your child will ever take out". Similarly, the section on finances in *Your future your choice* (page 12) prefaces the factual information with the statement, "*Though there is a cost involved, think of it as an investment—a higher education qualification can affect the job and salary you get*".

In the document for young people aged 14 and over, *Don't stop doing what you love*, the balance between the genres of traditional IAG and promotion is even more heavily weighted in favour of promotion. In fact, of the twenty-one pages of the document, only seven address themselves specifically to IAG matters. Pages 6—9 are a multiple-choice quiz that offers a somewhat simplified, age-appropriate version of a careers guidance test matching interests and aptitudes to careers outcomes. Pages 12—14 give information on study routes into higher education with particular emphasis on work-based entry routes. In both these sections, however, descriptive informational language is heavily interlaced with promotional, exhortative language. For example, the description of HE qualifications on page 14 is accompanied by the 'pros' of each qualification but with no equivalent 'cons' by way of a more balanced presentation. In fact, the purpose of this document is not really IAG; as the document itself states on its opening page of text, its purpose is to "*...put a stop to some of the myths that you might have heard about higher education*". This task is addressed through twelve pages of the document in various forms, including: Q&A style sections whereby common fears are raised as questions and then allayed in the answers (a similar rhetorical device is the use of declarative statements carrying negative views on HE which are then met with answers designed to reassure); case studies of HE students.

In all three documents the language is direct, constructed of short sentences in which the reader is addressed as 'you'. The documents make use of seemingly dialogical devices (frequent use of Q&A and similar rhetorical devices) but which, in fact, more closely

approximate pedagogical devices in their intent to instruct. In short, the principal common purpose of all three documents is to promote the benefits of HE while seeking to anticipate and allay possible fears or concerns. In this respect, as forms of written text, the Aimhigher documents can be seen as ‘interactional’ to the extent that, as with all written texts, they are written for particular readerships and are geared towards (or anticipate) particular types of response (Fairclough, 2001b, p.239). In the following section I shall examine how a discourse of responsibilisation is materialised in the three documents. To do this, I shall consider three salient themes as discussed below.

A discourse of responsibilisation

i) Higher earning power

The promotional guides for parents and for post-16 young people are both quick to assure their respective readerships of the financial benefits of a degree, with the claim that a graduate can expect significantly higher life-time earning power than a non-graduate. Both publications make the same claim (below) on their first page of written text:

‘An undergraduate degree can help your child earn, on average, over the course of their working life, comfortably over £100,000 more, net of taxes and in today’s valuation, than someone similar with two or more A levels. An average starting salary for graduates in full-time employment is around £20,000.’ (Help your child into Higher Education, 2009, p.3)

ii) The Knowledge Based Economy and the threat of occupational (and social) marginalisation

If the promise of a higher future earning power may be described as the rewarding ‘carrot’ of the responsabilisation of young people and their parents, the threat of occupational and (by extension) social marginalisation within a knowledge based economy may be viewed as the punitive ‘stick’. Again, both the promotional guides for parents and for post-16 young people make the same claim, arguing that many jobs in the future will require graduate-level skills and qualifications:

‘Recent forecasts suggest that 13 million jobs will become vacant between 2007 and 2017, just over half of which will be in occupations most likely to demand graduates.’ (Your future Your choice, 2009, p.4)

On one level, such economic/utilitarian framing of the benefits of HE study is of no surprise in light of an increasingly marketised higher education sector which must demonstrate to the fee-paying student ‘customer’ (and their parents) that their degrees will bring them an economic return on their investment (Boden & Nedeva, 2010). Beyond that, however, Rose’s (1992) discussion of the enterprising self reminds us that the exhortations to individual educational and occupational self-betterment contained within the Aimhigher documents are manifestations of a wider mode of responsabilisation. The documents’ claims are directed at social actors (young people and their parents) who have been exposed to a vocabulary of enterprise which:

‘...links political rhetoric and regulatory programmes to the self-steering capacities of subjects themselves...enterprise forges a link between the way we are governed by others and the ways we should govern ourselves. Enterprise here designates an array of rules for the conduct of one’s everyday existence: energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility.’ (Rose, 1992: 146).

From this perspective, the claims made within the documents for the economic benefits of higher education, and the language of personal enterprise and responsibility in which they are couched, are examples of the ways in which liberal democracies will attempt to govern *through* the aspirations of their subjects, and to bring those into line with wider political and economic objectives (Rose, 1992, p.147). Put simply, personal economic betterment leads to greater national economic competitiveness—the essence of the human capital model upon which the current neo-liberal economic settlement is predicated (Tomlinson, 2010). However, the discourse of enterprise and of responsibilisation is never simply framed in means-end economic terms; indeed, it is also a profoundly *moral* discourse which reaches down to the very ethics of what it means to be a good citizen in the modern consumer state. The ‘good’ parent will invest in their child and if any parents have any lingering doubts about the possible social marginalisation that awaits their children if they do not go on to higher education, the case study interview with the higher education student ‘Rhys’ offers admonitory advice:

‘Very few of my mates that I used to kick around with made it to university. Lots of them lacked the initiative and were unable to see past the obstacles that lay in the way, such as finance. Most of them are still living in the same area and have excelled little over the years.’ (Case study of ‘Rhys’, Help your child into Higher Education, 2009, p.13)

iii) Higher Education as choice, control and self-actualisation

The third theme related to the responsibilisation of young people and their parents is that of higher education as an expression of individual choice, control and self-actualisation. Young people are enjoined to think of higher education as a world of almost limitless opportunities to ‘be somebody’ (Ball, Maguire & Macrae 2000):

'Getting interested? You should be – there's a world of opportunities open to you. Now's the time when you can choose what you want to do, where you want to do it, and what kind of lifestyle you'd like to have.' (Your future Your choice 2009, p.4)

As Rose (1999) argues, we are 'obliged to be free'. Modern political rationality requires that, *"The self is to be a subjective being... [which] is to find meaning in existence by shaping its life through acts of choice"* (Rose, 1992, p.142). In modern liberal democracies this translates into forms of discourse which present everything to young people as a possibility (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Education is even offered up as a form of therapy by which to repair a 'loss' of the self-control and autonomization that should characterise the enterprising self:

'At 17, I got pregnant and gave up my A levels. When Monet was born, I got really depressed. A counsellor made me see that going back to college would let me control what I did with my life.' (Case study of 'Jessica', Don't stop doing what you love, 2009, p.21)

The Aimhigher documents are, of course, directed at 'non-traditional' working-class and minority ethnic students and their parents. As interactive texts which anticipate both readerships and responses (Fairclough, 2001b), the documents therefore make an attempt to attend to the perceptions that such students may have of higher education. The question of 'feeling out of place' is addressed directly in a Question and Answer format:

*'Isn't university for posh rich people? How is someone like me going to fit in and find friends at uni? **Cleo, 14, Lincoln***
Kris says: *You're talking to someone who never thought they were the university 'type'. I was constantly fighting the fear that I wasn't good enough or it would be me against them. But the one thing I've learned is whether you're poor, rich, white, black,*

purple, whatever education is for everyone if you're prepared to work for it. ' (Don't stop doing what you love, 2009: 15)

Thus, fears of prejudice are acknowledged but reduced to issues of perception—the wrong perception: New Labour rhetoric of a 'modern' post-class, post-'race' meritocracy—"if you're prepared to work for it"—is the prevalent discourse. Skeggs (2004) has written of how the White working-class in the UK have come to be associated with the 'unmodern'. This has been effected through (for example) the positioning of White working-class people as inherently racist or through their association with a state of spatial (and thus social) immobility (Skeggs, 2004, p.111). I believe that we can extend Skeggs' (2004) analysis to explain the post-class, post-'race' discourse evident in the Aimhigher documents as a further form of responsabilisation. Thus, the corollary to the 'modern', meritocratic discourse in the documents is that those who do not subscribe to this view (i.e. those who are unconvinced by such reassurances and remain worried about racism or class-based prejudice) are not sufficiently modern and may even hold 'regressive' beliefs. Raymond Williams' (1977) discussion of the 'dominant' and 'residual' forms of consciousness, which are part of the complex constituents of all social formations, offers us a way of interpreting this in terms of hegemonic power relations. While the dominant is that which is effective and, thus, the hegemonic form, the residual refers to the ways in which the past will still impinge upon the present:

'Thus, certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.' (Williams, 1977, p.122).

Crucially, as Williams (1977, p.122) observes, it is this ‘lived’ experience of the residual which may give it an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture. And it is within this light that we may view the Aimhigher documents: as a product of the contestation between the dominant ‘modern’ discourse of a meritocratic higher education system and a residual distrust among some fractions of the working-class of higher education—a distrust that is still very much a lived one and which is rooted in the objective realities of the sector. As previously discussed, there is, in fact, a wealth of research evidence to indicate classed (and also raced) patterns of access to higher education based upon highly unequal distributions of material and cultural resources (Reay et al. 2001; Ball et al. 2002). Moreover, when working-class students do enter higher education they may well feel ill at ease within what is still a predominantly middle-class institutional culture, experiencing feelings of ambivalence and emotional and cultural dislocation (Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Christie, 2007).

Of course, we should be wary of homogenising working-class attitudes and experiences. Research offers evidence of multiple complexities around working-class students’ sense of ‘fitting in’ within higher education: the few such students who attain a place at elite universities may require considerable emotional resources to navigate the social strangeness of their environment yet they may feel more at ease academically in elite HE than they did within their predominantly working-class state schools (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009a); in contrast, those students who attend less prestigious institutions with a greater proportion of similarly working-class students may well feel a degree of ease socially yet experience weak or ambivalent ‘learner identities’ that tend to be reinforced rather than challenged by the prevailing institutional academic culture (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009b).

Concluding remarks and the Con-Lib coalition and beyond

It has been the contention of this article that we may view the New Labour HE widening participation agenda, as evidenced by the three Aimhigher documents, as form of responsiblising discourse of working-class young people in the UK. Of course, it could be argued that middle-class young people in the UK are equally subject to discourses of responsibilisation in relation to higher education. This is certainly true, but, (and this is a broad generalisation requiring much intra-class qualification), the HE decision-making of most middle-class young people tends to be rooted within ‘deeply normalised grammars of aspiration’ (Ball et al. 2002, p.69). As I have discussed within this article, this is certainly not the case among working-class young people, and the Aimhigher programme represented a concerted and quite novel attempt to inculcate such a normalised grammar of aspiration. However, we know that HE study is a much riskier prospect for working-class students, culturally, socially and financially, than for their middle-class peers (Archer, Hutchings & Ross, 2003). Furthermore, if, as Ball, Maguire & Macrae (2000, p.4) note critically, responsibilisation connotes self-blame, then at least some of those working-class young people who make ‘bad’ choices to not go on to HE study may feel that they have only themselves to blame for what may prove to be bleak employment prospects. And therein, I believe, is where contention with the discourse of Aimhigher lies: while I concur with Passy’s (2012) point, apropos of Aimhigher, that few would disagree that the opening up of opportunities for HE study to disadvantaged groups is a good thing, it must also be noted that the social progressiveness and emancipatory potential of widening access may result in social coercion if HE study is presumed to be the *only* show in town.

Aimhigher itself is no longer active as the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government announced its closure at the end of the 2010—11 academic year as part of a raft of public spending cuts. However, the coalition government has made much of its

commitment to social mobility through ‘fair access’ to higher education in its White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (Department for Business Innovation and Skills [DBIS], 2011). Nevertheless, actual policies outlined in the White Paper are uneven and contradictory. Alongside the rhetorical commitment to social mobility there is a clear emphasis upon market competition between both institutions and students, which has led some critics to discern a clear dilution of the commitment to widening participation (WP). For example Passy (2012, pp.91-2) argues that although the coalition government’s discourse around WP may be similar to that of New Labour, it is driven primarily by an emphasis upon ‘freedom’ and ‘efficiency’, in the market-driven sense of these terms. Similarly, Graham (2013, p.78) suggests that the White Paper, with its emphasis upon access for ‘individuals with the highest academic potential’ (DBIS, 2011, p.7), indicates a narrower, more elitist understanding of widening participation than that presented by New Labour. From her research into the discourses of widening participation in the prospectus documents and websites of six English HEIs following publication of the White Paper, she found that one of the effects of increased competition between HEIs has been to encourage institutions that had previously emphasised their commitment to widening participation to de-accentuate this in favour of promotion through their academic quality and excellence (Graham, 2013, p.91).

The policy landscape of WP in higher education has, therefore, altered. Nevertheless, as Passy (2012, p.92) notes, widening participation has become part of the narrative of social justice in the UK and no government will want to be seen to oppose the notion of access to HE for all suitably qualified applicants. And herein lies the salient point: while particular policies and WP agendas will come and go, they will all be underwritten by the same discourse of responsibilisation of young people and their parents aimed at the development of an entrepreneurial self. Of course, while we are positioned by and within discourses, we may also actively position ourselves in relation to them. Within this article, I have discussed the

ways in which the three Aimhigher documents seek to position young people and their parents within a prevailing neo-liberalist responsibilising discourse. But discourses do not simply work ‘top-down’; rather, as I have previously discussed, the concept of hegemony stresses the possibilities of interpretation, contestation and resistance. A good illustration of this may be found in recent research by Wilkins (2012). In his study of the relations between teachers and their pupils aged 12-13, Wilkins (2012) demonstrates how neo-liberalist values are constituted in certain pedagogic practices that promote academic competition. However, the values promoted by such practices are by no means straightforwardly assimilated by the pupils; rather, they are subject to, and to some extent resisted by, competing dynamics of friendship, gender and popularity. Thus, when young people are exposed to neo-liberalist responsibilising discourses and practices, it may not be at all obvious how they are interpreted and worked into actual behaviour. Further evidence of the complexity of the ways in which young people position themselves in relation to dominant educational discourses may be found in the work of Archer and colleagues. This research, which was conducted with working-class non-participants to higher education, revealed a range of positions towards HE, and towards dominant discourses of participation, that are rooted in complex and cross-cutting identities of ‘race’, class and gender (Archer, Pratt & Phillips, 2001).

The relationship between working-class young people and higher education in the UK is, therefore, a complex and often difficult one and this raises questions over whether such young people and their parents will continue to hold faith in the educational and social mobility promised by responsibilising discourses around HE participation. These questions are necessarily speculative in nature but they may be of significance. A first concern relates to the ever-rising costs of higher education, particularly in the form of tuition fees. Under the coalition government, tuition fees have risen almost three-fold in England to as much as £9,000 per year in most universities. Research tells us that working-class students tend to be

more aware of debt than middle-class students and are more likely to be deterred from HE study because of it (Callender & Jackson, 2005). A second factor relates to the growing spectre of mass youth unemployment. There are currently 1.09 million people between 16 and 24 not in education, employment or training in the UK (Dorling, 2013a). This is by no means solely a UK problem. As Dorling (2013b) notes, across Europe at least 26 million people are unemployed, among whom almost a quarter are aged under twenty-five. It is a bitter irony, then, that they are also the best credentialed generation. And this leads on to the third factor: the relationship between supply of and demand for graduates within the UK labour market.

The question of whether there is an over-supply of graduates remains contentious. Elias & Purcell (2004, p.5) have argued that there is no evidence for this, although it should be noted that this study was conducted prior to the global economic downturn following the 2008 banking crisis; by contrast, in a post-crisis study, Brown, Lauder & Ashton (2011) contend strongly that a mis-match between graduate supply and labour market demand has become a structural feature of advanced economies such as the UK or USA. It is difficult to predict the long-term reaction to this increasingly attenuated relationship between post-compulsory education and employment, but we have seen some recent indications. The summer of 2011 witnessed the worst urban youth riots in England in a generation. The causes of the disturbances were complex, but a common contributing factor identified across most of the more nuanced commentary was young people's frustration borne of a situation that Ainley and Allen (2010) term 'education without jobs'. However, while we may well see further such eruptions from increasingly disenfranchised sections of youth, it is more likely (although equally depressing) that the predominant reaction among large sections of working-class youth is an introverted individualism. As Lauder et al. (2012, p.6) observe, many young people will be well aware of the hollowness of the 'learning = earning' contract promised by

dominant responsibilising discourses surrounding higher education, yet feel they have little option but to participate in the face of limited opportunities for fulfilling employment for those without HE credentials. And this is something of concern to all of us working within or outside of higher education.

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