

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Have we forgotten about social class?

Featuring Andy Hargreaves with Stanton Wortham (host) and Allison Skerret (commentator)

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Stanton Wortham 0:05

Welcome back to another episode of Pulled Up Short. Thank you for joining us. Today we're very pleased to have Andy Hargreaves, a professor at Boston College, and Allison Skerrett, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin. Andy is going to speak to us today about social class and the importance of paying attention to social class as we try to understand the forms of social organization that are creating injustices and pathologies in the world today. Andy, thanks very much for being with us.

Andy Hargreaves 0:35

You're welcome, Stanton. It's a pleasure.

Stanton Wortham 0:37

So please, can you give us a sense of how you're going to pull us up short with this notion of social class as something we've overlooked?

Andy Hargreaves 0:44

Well, I guess probably - in tune with just about everybody who was involved in this podcast and probably listening to it - I've, for many years and most of my adult life, had a passion for equity, for social justice, and for inclusion in education. What I've been aware of is in the community of people who are concerned about this within the United States, but increasingly actually also outside the United States, that [focus on equity, social justice, and inclusion in education] has been equated with diversity of many different kinds, marginalization of many different kinds, and oppression of many different kinds - especially with white privilege which is particularly important, and I have enormous empathy with as an issue. But white privilege and the discussion around that has tended, at the same time, to exclude equally important issues of wealth privilege. Wealth privilege is exemplified, for example, in the fact that 26 people - 23 of whom are men - own more than 50% of the world's wealth, which leaves everyone else scrambling for the rest. By the way, the wealthiest people are not all white. The majority of billionaires actually live in China. So alongside - not instead of - but alongside issues of white privilege, I believe we also as a uniting, not a divisive force, need to deal with issues of wealth privilege and therefore issues of social class that are defined by wealth, income, and the kind of work that we do.

We do, to some degree, get at some of that when we talk about poverty as a major form of disadvantage and marginalization. But if we equate class only with poverty, or not, with, for example, many kinds of people who do more manual work, or work with their hands, then poverty becomes the only identity you have to leave behind in order to be successful. If you grew up working class, it's something you have to abandon as an identity if you want to succeed.

In part, this is because of my own background, Stanton, as I've written a memoir about recently, as you know, called *Moving*, which is about the struggle for social mobility or what Americans would understand as 'the American dream.' This memoir is about my own experience: white, working class, northern British (which is very different from southern British, by the way), 1960s, growing up in that environment. Not as a positionality that separates people like me, or should separate people like me from other kinds of marginalized positionalities, but really, the memoir is about how we can bring together and find narratives - inclusive narratives - that involve all young people who struggle because of circumstances in their life: of disadvantage, marginalization and oppression. Instead of having a narrative of diversity and inclusion of many kinds, but not class, that occupies the center and the left, and a narrative of economic disadvantage or labor that is increasingly being occupied by populism and by the right; we can find and struggle for a way to bring together everyone who struggles, understanding their differences, but also being galvanized by what they have in common for a better education, better life, and a better world for all of us.

Stanton Wortham 5:20

I see. So you're saying that there's been a lot of focus recently on unjust disadvantage that's emphasized identity categories, racial categories, and ethnic categories. You're sympathetic to these movements like the Black Lives Matter movement, and you think that sort of unjust disadvantage is a reality that we have to fight to overcome. But you're saying social class is something else that sometimes is ignored or overlooked in these conversations about injustice. And you're saying that social class is in some ways similar to other forms of disadvantage, oppression, discrimination suffered by members of various marginalized or racialized minoritized groups.

But you're saying in other ways, social class is a little bit different as a form of identity that leads to disadvantage. Can you tell me a little more about why you think social class is often overlooked? Why is it that people don't think of it? I know, this isn't true in the British context, but in the American context, it's definitely true that people will shy away from emphasizing social class, even people who are very concerned to address questions of justice and disadvantage. Why do we not focus on it in the same way?

Andy Hargreaves 6:41

Well, that's a fascinating question, Stanton. I'm not sure there's a complete categorical, certain answer that anyone has found, but many people, particularly recently, have written about what they call "class cluelessness," a book by Joan Williams in particular, which is how Americans are comfortable talking about all kinds of disadvantage, but not about social class. The American dream lives very large within

the American imagination: the fact that people can start from any circumstance, any background, any culture, any accent, any language, and with hard work, application, and some talent can be anything that they want to be. But the truth is: in terms of the developed economies, the United States continues to be one of the most unequal countries in the world. It has some of the lowest rates of social mobility, which is the chance to move up from your class of origin, defined by income or wealth or job of your parents, to something else. But the dream is very powerfully the idea that anyone can make it. On the left and right, people will say, "You can be anything you want to be. Follow your dreams," which is actually a cruel lie for many young people if you look at the social statistics, not the individual psychological narrative. So it's the compelling narrative of continuing to believe in the American dream that makes it very hard for people to talk about social class unless there are manifest obstacles in the way that are clearly there by color, or by whether you're an immigrant or a refugee, for example.

Stanton Wortham 9:22

You said something very interesting about social class earlier - that it's the only minoritized identity that you have to give up in order to move forward. I can see how you mean that. I guess there are some other identities where you do have to give some things up, but with social class, it's sort of definitional, as you say, if you define it in terms of income. So if you want to move up in income, then you have to leave behind who you used to be. You mentioned your memoir, which is great. I really enjoyed it. I wonder if you could talk a little bit personally about how you struggled with that need to give up your identity as a working class person, as you moved ahead in your career. What did that feel like? Can you share some of the moments that you went through?

Andy Hargreaves 10:08

Of course, I'd be glad to. One issue to understand that's really important is to think about, how much do we try, as we should, to pay attention to what kind of characters are in our literature? What kind of parents are represented by race, by whether they're LGBTQ, whether they're dads who are married to each other, or moms who are married to each other? And we think more and more about how to address those issues in our curriculum. We have Black history month, which we should, and it's right. Now we're thinking about how to do that in relation to other groups that we focus on. I have five grandchildren, all of whom are mixed race and part Asian in terms of heritage. So paying attention to those things in the curriculum. North of the border in Canada, we pay huge attention now, at long last, to indigenous issues and indigenous oppression within everybody's curriculum down to a very, very young age.

So this is important, but we should ask where in the curriculum is any attention to labor, to labor history? Where is any attention to children's labor rights, to the labor conditions of young people in other countries, as well as in the United States? Do we/should we/can we treat vocational education as having equal status and value as other kinds of college education within our society? Where was the history of the labor movement, of the Polish solidarity movement led by women as much as by men, for example? I could continue with this, but where are the working class people in in the books that we

read, and that we look at? And class has many colors, by the way. I think we've seen with our essential workers during the pandemic - our bus drivers, our shop workers, our cleaners in hospitals and in stores - I hope now we're all starting to see that when we talk about class, we're not talking about the white working class. Instead, we're talking about class that has many colors, that can be many identities, that can be brought together.

My experience of this is through my memoir of growing up in a northern English mill town in the 1960s (which is by the way, now one of the prime places of Brexit, of xenophobia and fear of 'the other' who come from outside to threaten us) in this community before really immigration started to move in, and in a big way into our community. I experienced living on one side of town and going to high school on the other side of town. Until the age of 11, I went to a local primary school, mainly for working class kids like me and had utterly inspirational teaching, which we'd recognize now as being whole child education. My teacher understood who I was, even though I was a bit quirky, probably like everybody in this podcast, and was able to work with that, but not let me be too much of it at the same time so it interfered with other people and their aspirations and educational needs too. And then I went to high school, and on the other side of town, selected for the top 20% of boys in my town. The first year at high school was great. My report showed me I was in the top class of three and the top school in the town. In some subjects I was top. I was a top boy in a top class and a top school. So in terms of social mobility, everything looked pretty good. And then from about the age of 13/14, you look at my school reports, as my wife and I did a few years ago, and suddenly I find I'm not top, but I'm 26th, 25th, 27th. And the comments on the reports are about disappointment, or lack of effort, or things of a similar kind. My wife and I stood in the basement looking at these reports, and I said to her "I wonder what went wrong then?". She said, "It's obvious. Your dad died."

So when I was 12 years old, my father died of his third heart attack. My mother was widowed at the age of 43. She had three boys to raise. I was the youngest. The others were already moving into factories. She worked three jobs: in a local store, cleaning people's houses, and looking after people's children. For a while she held it together, but then it became too much. She collapsed with, what was then called, her nerves or a nervous breakdown. We now call it serious mental health depression. She had anorexia. She wouldn't eat. She came close to starving. She had agrophobia. She wouldn't leave the house for months on end. She became addicted to barbiturates to help her sleep; it took her two or three years to come off them. And suddenly, like many kids today, I think, "Whoa, instead of my mum being in charge of us, I suddenly realized I was in charge of her - actually, for the rest of life, pretty much."

And so, I would never appear at school for months on end until 11 o'clock in the morning, having cleaned the house, vacuumed up, gone and bought food, so that when my grandmother came up, she could try and get the day going. My school never talked to me about this because we were like repressed British males. You didn't discuss those things with boys at that time. But the main classes I missed were my math classes. Even into my 50s, I had phobias and anxiety dreams about mathematics classes in schools. So there was a lack of connection of my school to see my family struggles, not only

to, in a way, care for them, but I would say later - when I applied to university - didn't have the same time to get involved in clubs, societies, extracurriculars, and internships as other people. In a way, my family circumstances were a deficit. But children like me, today actually, should be able to put on their forms when they apply for college, that they've shown leadership in their family by looking after brothers, sisters, or parents who were unable to look after themselves.

This was then compounded by two other things. One was curricular differences. In the English system, when you're between 16 and 18, you take three subjects - no more - before you go to university. One of those for me was history, but the history that I studied was very colonialist. Gosh, I wish we could have decolonized that curriculum, because it was about Popes, presidents, prime ministers, and generals. It was a history of great men of the British Empire, by and large, and it meant absolutely nothing to me in my working class life in the north of England. So I came very close to failing the history test exam the first time around. It was not enough to get me into college. I had to stay another year and go through that again. When my lessons began in exactly the same way they had in the previous year but with a different teacher, the only answer was to go off to the library and teach myself questions that were on the exam, but not taught to me - on social and economic history, the history of the many, of agriculture, of the industrial revolution, not the history of the few.

This is one reason why, of late, Stanton, I've become very interested in student engagement with learning, because my school gave me - what was for my culture - a very disengaging kind of learning. So all this draws our attention to what happens when you live on one side of town with one kind of life and go to school on the other side of town. By the way, this is often what magnet schools or schools of choice do to their kids. They take them out of their neighborhoods, and they put them somewhere else, at charter schools, for example. You can't see it in terms of your appearance. You'll look at me now, of course, and you say, "Manifest white privilege." But as a child, even though you'd look like everyone else, your experience is totally different in terms of working class culture versus middle class culture - managing a different curriculum, having a different kind of family life, having to negotiate the local gangs when you're the only person in your neighborhood at age 16 still in a school uniform and still going to the other side of town. I've had people write to me who are of totally different backgrounds, people of color, people from different countries who say that they resonate absolutely with these primal themes of feeling like you've grown up in one kind of culture, you go to school that represents another kind of culture, and there's totally insufficient effort to be responsive to the difference between the two.

Stanton Wortham 20:35

That's great. So you're saying that social class, in some ways is analogous to other identities that are minoritized, racialized, that are treated as other. It involves some similar kinds of culture clash. But you also say that class is in some ways different because it cuts across different groups, so there are people who are disadvantaged in multiple ways. Tell me a little bit about the implications of this. One thing that we confront nowadays is we confront people who, even though they're a member of one group that is disadvantaged, they still find themselves pitted against or thinking unpleasant thoughts about

another minoritized group. You've done a great job of articulating the dignity and the rationality behind the kind of working class life that you experienced and that others experience. How do we engage with the fact that people sometimes see themselves as opposed to other groups that in some ways have gone through similar kinds of experiences? Is that inevitable? Is that something that we just have to live with?

Andy Hargreaves 21:43

Well, there's a personal challenge and a leadership challenge there. I think the personal challenge for all of us is a challenge of suffering, really. When we have experiences of suffering in our lives and in our own background, it should not only draw us to people who've had as close as possible exactly the same kind of suffering and exactly the same kind of identity. By the way, even then, we find we don't have exactly the same identity. I think Kimberly Crenshaw and Patricia [Hill Collins] were very good at this, in talking about intersectionality. We don't have one identity; we have many things. So perhaps I'm able to surprise you, shock you, but I'm actually quite a little bit ADHD. In fact, I'm adult diagnosed ADHD. I've been counseled as an adult for ADHD. In school, this manifested itself as messiness, disorganization, lateness, interrupting people all the time because I knew what they were going to say, so why on earth should I wait for them to finish their sentences? This is going on at the same time as having a class identity. What we have to avoid is to think that if we're gay, the only people we can identify with, or bond with, or unite with are other people who are gay, or if you're black, black, or working class, working class, and so on. But rather the points of suffering (as we've experienced it) or injustice is to draw on that primal experience of injustice, suffering, or marginalization, and then find ways to empathize.

Actually, Adam Smith talks about sympathy, which is more than empathy. Sympathy is not pity; sympathy is feeling-with not feeling-for. I think one of our great quests has to be to feel-with people who also struggle, who also have challenges, but not necessarily exactly the same kinds of challenges as ours. So I think that's the personal: not to look at other people that have a different one and say, "Well, you know, you think you have it hard, but look at me. My suffering was so much greater or more important than yours," but to use it as a source of connection - to create a movement, really, against disadvantage and marginalization of all kinds. And the task of leadership, which we've not quite yet achieved almost anywhere in America, is to be able to articulate that as a narrative, and not to fear groups we might upset or offend. For example, if we were to dignify the working class, we would be driven by fear that then we would offend people who might think we're defending the white working class and its racism and its xenophobia. And so therefore, we avoid talking about class, and we talk about poverty, or indeed we talk about the middle class, instead of talking about the working class. All identities, pretty much, are flawed and not perfect. So as well as uniting with other people, I think it's important that all of us have humility about the imperfections of our own identities.

Kimberle Crenshaw pointed out that there had been a silencing of the literature and the research indicating that in America, the highest rates of reported domestic violence do not occur - not levels, but rates - in heterosexual relationships, and Crenshaw herself, the queen of intersectionality said,

there has been a repression of this data because of fear of the consequences in the trans community and in the feminist community. There are great conflicts now between different generations of feminists, as to what is a woman and whether biology is any part of that definition, or whether it is purely a cultural phenomenon. This is not agreed. It is disputed, sometimes quite bitterly. And we know that if we're trying to have religious tolerance and religious inclusion, there are many religions which are misogynistic and homophobic, but we tend to silence most of these imperfections. And I think we all need to have a little humility about the imperfections of our own identities. Once we have that humility, the bonding with others is easier to do, rather than setting ourselves against each other. And the task of leadership, as I really started to say, is to find a narrative that can do that - that can understand the flaws, that can acknowledge the imperfections, that can build on the pride, that can recognize the injustice, and that can do that in a way that brings us - like our essential workers - understanding in many colors, identities, backgrounds, not just one, so that we can move in common cause to create equity on an economic basis, as well as on a cultural basis.

Stanton Wortham 28:23

Very useful. So this has been helpful in getting us to engage with questions of social class, which in the U.S. context, at least, is something that we will often background, as you say, for fear of upsetting others. It's not a category that we're as comfortable with. At this point, I'd like to ask Allison Skerrett. Allison, if you could come in and ask Andy a couple of questions.

Allison Skerrett 29:13

Thank you, Stanton, and thank you, Andy. I really enjoyed listening to the exchange between the two of you. Andy and I, we've had many conversations about social class. We've also talked about the intersections - you've been mentioning Crenshaw's work quite a bit - among social class, gender, race, and immigration as well. So as you were speaking, I really enjoyed hearing you unpack what defines social class. You mentioned income and wealth. You also mentioned one's occupation and then also the occupation or social class of one's parents. And I wanted to hear you talk a bit about this concept or issue of habitus. You have lived this journey of moving from the working class into - I'm not sure what class you would identify yourself with right now. You don't have to say.

Andy Hargreaves 30:23

Oh, I'm upper middle class now. There's no question. Thank you for 15 years of working at Boston College and being paid a very decent salary.

Allison Skerrett 30:34

Okay, great. And so, we've talked about this a little bit, thinking about what constitutes the habitus of the middle class, or the upper middle class, if you will. You've been talking about how people may leave behind particular identities, and I want to challenge that a little bit. You probably know where I'm going with this. I'm interested in your story, or some thoughts around the issue of how, as people move up in terms of income, or occupations, if you will, because that's where social mobility can really sort of enhance those opportunities - how do we think about this issue of habitus and cultivating

particular types of ways of being, valuing, knowing, and doing that are associated with different classes?

Andy Hargreaves 31:29

Thanks, Allison. It's not just a question, it's really like a position that you're setting out, which I think is really important. There's a book a number of years ago, and I can't remember the author now, called *Strangers in Paradise*. And it's a book of narratives, of biographies - it's many years ago - of men who work in the academy and in universities, and come from working class backgrounds themselves. It's a book I identify with enormously, because it describes how, even when they're president of the university, they feel like they don't really fit. And I've spent all my life feeling this, with no disrespect to Boston College or any of the other several universities I've worked in three different countries, the feeling has always been exactly the same - that somehow I don't really belong here. And the way people describe it is in terms of culture, which is a particular kind of middle class culture, within the universities, that has to do with many things: directness versus indirectness, bluntness rather than sophistication or allusions or hinting of speech. I find that especially in America, I'll talk to anybody and within three minutes, even if they hated being there, they'll let you know that they went to Harvard, or Stanford, or another Ivy League school. And the more left people go, the more likely they are to mention their school - their Ivy League school - as part of their identity. So you're talking about habitus and culture, and I've given you one tiny example of it. One of the reasons I wrote my memoir is really to honor the culture that people, like my mother, were part of and that I grew up with. It's laughing out loud, rather than sniggering and giggling. It's about being direct. It's about being honest and transparent. It's about working hard. It is about celebrating your successes, openly and recklessly. It is not about fake humility.

I have a piece at the moment we're recording coming out next week in *The Washington Post*, an op-ed that is about social and emotional learning. Of course many people want social and emotional learning as a response to the mental health crisis and our response to COVID-19. But America, compared to the rest of the world, has gone with social and emotional learning rather than well-being in society and in life. The thing about social emotional learning, the critique of it, including from African American groups, has been that it privileges a white middle class, repressed male form of emotionality in terms of empathizing with others' emotions, especially being able to regulate your emotions, to have self-regulation, grit, mindfulness, and so on, rather than raucous, laugh-out-loud emotions. There's a bit of a change in social emotional learning - what's called transformational - to be a bit more responsive to racism and issues of diversity. But the whole thing of habitus you describe is one that has a racial dimension and one that has a class dimension, because it's not only privileging white ways of being as the perfect, emotionally neutral, universal way to be. It's also privileging middle class, or even upper middle class, ways of being. We might even say Barack Obama ways of being, as kind of repressed, understated, polite, not very direct, and so on. I think there is a massive issue of habitus here, as you say, that can marginalize people by class, and by race, and by other kinds of identity as well.

Allison Skerrett 36:39

Thank you so much, Andy. I really appreciate your thoughts on that. I think I can ask one more question. I want to go back a bit to intersectionality, and talk some more about about race. You know, listening to you and Stanton, there was quite a stimulating conversation about different minoritized identities, and the issue of, for example, how people who are minoritized in multiple ways may still have difficulty being empathetic toward others or even sympathetic toward others who are perhaps trying to gain justice for a particular group, for an identity that they also claim.

So I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about this issue of racially minoritized people or groups specifically, and how that may intersect or does intersect with social class. Because yes, we do have multiple identities, but the research tells us that in America, for example, that race is often the most salient identity, whether that is something that is salient for the individual, or whether that is an identity that they have been positioned to take up. And so thinking of your story, for example, and my story - I think we would see some some differences that are not strictly about social class, but that race is actually quite central to those narratives. So thinking, for example, how I may be positioned by people in society as a black woman, without necessarily taking account of whether I am working class, middle class, or upper middle class, and how that might really affect our opportunities. If we went back to habitus, it affects feeling that one can own, develop, or cultivate particular tastes, or whether we're looking at a situation where we need to think about the whole concept of class itself - middle class, upper middle class - and how those elements may change or may need to adapt, given that we have this opportunity for economic mobility, right? So how might we disentangle economic mobility from social class mobility, per se?

Andy Hargreaves 39:29

Thanks for that analysis, which I think is really important, and I'll begin responding to it with a very curious example, but I hope pretty quickly you won't see it's curious. My colleague and friend from Boston College, Dennis Shirley, and I have a weird passion as well as writing and that is walking the 2000+ miles of the Appalachian Trail in the United States in sections. We love that it's outdoors. It's in nature. There's so much environmentally that you could say that's positive about it. We almost never say it, but we've now walked almost half of the Appalachian Trail, over 1000 miles. And it is a great rarity to see anyone on the trail (and you see many) who are ethnically or racially, anything other than white or Asian by background. I'm followed on Twitter by a group called Black Girls Hiking. They're advocates for getting black girls hiking, and they've written about why - why don't why don't more black girls go hiking, compared to white girls or Asian girls or boys? And they go through many reasons for this. Some of it is economic, which is that many of them just can't afford to throw out their jobs for a week and go out, buy the camping gear, and so on. But some of it is to do with when I walk on the road towards the trail with a backpack, nobody will stop me. In fact, somebody might give me a ride, if I'm lucky. But if I'm black and walking towards the trail with a backpack, people will stop me because they might think I'm up to no good.

So the visible part of visible minority, or majority sometimes, is really important to recognize and really important to understand - a huge aspect of marginalization that I've never encountered and never will.

And then there's invisible marginalization that is subtle, not just to take class, but autism, for example, or Aspergers. You can't always immediately see, you know, looking at someone, are they autistic? Do they have Asperger's? Or even people who identify as LGBTQ - sometimes, it's obvious in terms of stereotypical ways of expressing that identity, but often it's not. And so the problem of invisibility can carry challenges with it, as well as visibility. And then as you're saying, once you accept the visible part, it's important not to singularize it in a way, and to say, "That's the only important thing about me," or whatever. Goffman, a Canadian American from the 1960s and 70s, when he talks about stigma and how people are stigmatized - people who are disabled or who have been in prison - it doesn't become what he called your "master characteristic," which is the only thing that matters and the only way that people react to you. I'm totally empathetic with and indeed curious about what it means to both have a very visible part of your identity that either marginalizes you on the one hand, or for people like me, privileges you on the other, and then to somehow get people to understand or accept that it's not the only thing that marginalizes you or not the only thing that privileges you, or one or the other. Sometimes the intersections might mean you're marginalized in some ways but privileged in others. I think the task of leadership in a school, a faculty, a country is somehow: how can we steer and facilitate important but difficult conversations about those very issues and in ways that ultimately bring about solidarity amongst us, rather than division amongst ourselves? I know that you and I know each other well, and we talk about these privately as well as we do here, and it's so important to be able to do that.

Allison Skerrett 44:46

Thank you so much, Andy.

Stanton Wortham 44:48

Thank you for joining us for this episode with Andy Hargreaves and Alison Skerrett. We have two more episodes in this, our second season. Next week we'll have Ken Gergen on whether individuality is in fact impossible. Then the week after, Karen Nisenbaum on destiny. Check out our partner at the American Anthropological Association website, AmericanAnthro.org. Please subscribe to Pulled Up Short, wherever you get your podcasts, and follow us on Twitter @PulledUpShort. Thanks for being with us.