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Neoliberal Capitalism, Transnationalism and Networked Individualism: Rethinking Social Class in International Student Mobility

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Nguyen Quynh Tram Doan

ABSTRACT

In this research project, I draw from a critical discourse analysis of peer-led discussions in International Lounge, an internet forum for international students in the UK, to explore how new class paradigms and competencies are constructed in an online transnational communication space and in an age of increased individualisation. Just as mass media have facilitated the formation of national middle classes, online media may offer the communication architecture and social morphology necessary for the emergence of a transnational hypermobile class. Nevertheless, this study takes into account instances of spatial and temporal in

obscures class differences (Case & Vita, 2003; Cogan, 1998; Parker & Jary, 1995; Ritzer, 1993, 1998). In their critique of the commodified curriculum as a vehicle for market share, Case and Vita observe 'tr

The search for capital through international education consumption

Migration for education has been conceptualised as a continuum of life chances and aspirations, rather than a one-off event (Findley,

neoliberal pressure. Firstly, class reproduction among student-migrants could be understood in terms of a neoliberal shift away from a collective interest in shaping a field, towards personal projects to cross-fields for individualistic liberation, facilitated by an institutional framework that fosters homologies between fields. In particular, losing their dominance in the national international education field, the middle class has striven for transferable cultural capital to move from IHE field to global labour field and meet new criteria of power. Therefore, social class remains, but in an era of instability as neoliberalism thrives, the collective and acquiescing sense of social class is supplanted by an individualised model. It emphasises that individuals take responsibility over their uncertain futures, and stage their adaptability across fields. This individualising principle is accompanied by the neoliberal IHE project that reinforces autonomy and competition.

Further, neoliberal transformation merges 'sub-field of restricted production' and' sub-field of large-scale production' (Bourdieu, 1984) to create a market-based system of education. This creates the condition for cross-field accumulation of cultural capital on the part of international students, who will compete in the global labour market upon graduation to enrol into the middle class. Secondly, the neoliberal ethos of competition and individualism triggers three competing forces that drive the class reproduction among international students: personal endeavour to search for distinctive mobility habitus, conflicts between powerful employers over the 'employability' agenda to compete for talent, and intensive use of quantitative measurement of attributes to ensure universities provide a voluminous yet homogeneous cohort of workers. Therefore, my research attempts to fill the gap in the literature about class reproduction amongst student-

Unlike other migrant groups, members of the TNCC, including decision-

reinforces existing structural hierarchy, because participation in IHE entails mobilising desirable forms of capital derived from personal circumstances to occupy a dominant position in the field. On the other hand, it is about the aspiration to search for possibilities within hierarchies, and the imagination of personal liberation in the future. In this sense, for student-migrants, experiences with transnationalism over the course of education serve to acquire the right disposition for mobility opportunities in work and life, which enable them to move across fields and disrupt social structures. In turn, this disposition subtly enables hierarchy not to limit, but foster their advancement in the decentralised system brought about by neoliberalism. Building on these arguments, my research explores how conflicting patterns of transnational class politics manifest in student-migrant forum communication.

topics that subtly convey classifications, so as to trace the improvised language for thinking and talking about class online. It adopts two analytical categories from previous studies about group dynamics in online class politics. First, Kendall's (1998) research into a chat-oriented MUD called BlueSkype suggests that participants enact a sense of middle-class peer group through 'roll calls' about lifestyles and corresponding levels of income. They hold these as measures of *personal attainment*, which not only indicates their pride on autonomously achieved status, rather than ascribed status, but also implies their superiority over others within the virtual community. Second, Polson's (2011) study of meet-up websites for elite migrants in Paris shows that methods of distinction are used to carve out new class competencies and hierarchies based on *global proficiencies*. Members of these online groups demonstrate their belonging to 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1982) by displaying their migration trajectories, language capacities and a series of global mindsets, which in turn confer levels of status on them. Above all, they benefit from online and offline opportunities 5u15 (d) -1 ()-2 68 (p)- (g) ston tggm ags

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seeks to comprehend the transfer of capital across fields, which marks the complexity of class politics in neoliberal capitalist society.

The second perspective takes into account the transnational nature of both communication space and participants in internet forums. Especially, it adopts Baas (2010) and Robertson's (2013) conceptions of 'becoming transnationals' during migration journeys for education. It features two key aspects. First, the online class politics among student-migrants is the negotiation of power between students and various actors across borders. These actors include national governments, families, universities, employers and other migrant groups. Online and offline, they influence the migration trajectories and class perceptions of 'nternational students. Second, it is not only a spatial negotiation between 'here', 'theren tr45 3 () 34Tp

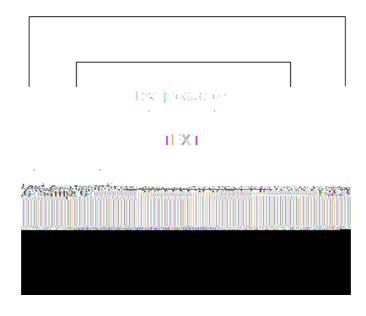


Figure 1. Fairclough's model for CDA (1992: 73)

2013), International Lounge is dedicated to those who are interested in studying in the UK, or have already come to the country.

The choice regarding the research field was based on two reasons. First, the structure of International Lounge exemplifies the transnational and exclusive communication space into which this research inquires. With the aim of bringing international students together, the forum operates by facilitating general threads where participants from any country could ask questions about studying in the UK and lead the discussions. Nevertheless, over the time, participants have created 37 national/ethnic 'societies' to connect with their compatriots. The coexistence of nationalism and cosmopolitanism, group identities and personality traits in the forum provides a very dynamic field to study the online manifestations of the transnational capitalist class. Second, the UK abolished the post-study work visa in 2012 and work permit of non-EU college students in July 2015, which means student-migrants are now faced with more constraint

tangledinthemist: hi people, newbie here. I just found my home!

Zahra96: Came across this society and already feeling at home.

Princess31: (...) I think i have developed a lack of identity. Which is why i have joined this soc. I feel right at home haha.

Moreover, participants often recall nostalgic memories when referring to Pakistan as 'home', locating

(...) The International Lounge is a place for TSR users from all corners of the world to get together. This is a great section to be in if you are living in Britain but have different cultural heritage. (...) Are you an international user or want to chat to those who are? Perfect – po

immigrants not only identify themselves as international students, but also actively establish supremacy over their fellow compatriots. Their belonging to TSR Pakistani Society is disengaged from the nationalist appeal to organise a collective field through cultivating homogeneity. Instead, it is rooted in personal strategies to deploy a practical sense of transnational communication, derived from offline nomadic habitus, to meet the demands of an online communication field. Their commandment of the field comes at the expense of inclusive participation. In this regard, social class is intrinsically a cultural construction of unique lifestyles and communication paradigms, which enables individuals to distinguish themselves and obtain an advantage in a particular social arena. Moreover, at the centre of class reproduction is the individualising impulse that works to establish a bridge between being at home offline and becoming at home online, offline cultural capital and online competence, the private familial field and the public communication field.

The language for legitimate belonging

While second-generation immigrants largely direct the organisation of activities in TSR Pakistani Society, their membership is often questioned by Pakistani participants coming from outside the UK, mainly through the debates about their levels of Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. The analysis presented here focuses on a thread named 'I'm Punjabi, but can't speak the language, help?' (see Appendix 1). This thread was posted outside TSR Pakistan Society, but it is this lack of affiliation that makes it an interesting case of the subtle conflict between nationalism, globalisation and the individualisation of social class.

Before discussing the discursive patterns of social class in this thread, I shall first introduce the theoretical and historical context of the relationship between language and social class. Bourdieu's concept of 'linguistic capital' (1990: 114) provides a useful departure point. A form of embodied cultural capital, it is defined as the mastery of language that enables one to speak in a manner which is more favourable to the structure of the linguistic market. Power relations work to determine the allocation of linguistic capital, ensuring that the elite always speak the most prestigious language. Building on Bourdieu's work to study nationalism, Hage (1998: 53) argues that '

level, this conversational text is comprised of three discourses, namely belonging, risk and liberty. On one hand, *William_walker* and *Polpo* made a connection between speaking English ('speak English with a regional British accent that is all you should want', 'gain a high fluency in English') and being British ('if you want to be British', 'you can support the language of the great country you live in and are part of'). On the other hand, william_walker frames Punjabi as a threat to the UK ('immigrant legacy', 'colonising Britain'). SSS_JJJ challenges both discourses of belonging and risk, stating that 'people can learn whatever language they like'.

themselves and become more individualised through the rhetoric of authenticity, signifying the reproduction of social class through establishing moral boundaries. However, these boundaries are fluctuating, for the student-migrants are caught between conflicting forces of nationalism and globalisation within a transnational communication space, where authenticity takes on various meanings. If 'speaking Punjabi' means 'being authentic', Urdu speakers serve as the banal elite Other in the refinement of Pakistani nationalism, but when it comes to the resistance against global homogenisation, they belong to the same category with Punjabi speakers in opposition to the imperialistic English*robthehero*: (...) I was born in Moscow, and came to NYC when I was 5. I've pretty much lived here my whole life, apart from spending a year in Switzerland as part of a student exchange. (...) I can't wait to get out the city.

younggirlbribri: (...) I think a lot of people want to go some place different and for me that is leaving th1 (o) -4 () 1 w-5 () 1 (i-4 (iffe) -3 (n) -5(t) -1 () 1 (g) -3 (o) -4 n) -5(g) -3 (o) -4 () 1 (g) -3 (o) -4 a gal

Hayley Williams

transnational capitalist class, as discussed in the literature review. Further, the individualisation of social class in this case is double-edged, precisely because it detaches from the normative coherence of national class, but at the same time conceals patterns of categorisation in the name of heterogeneity. *William_walker*, who previously equated multilingualism to colonialism in the thread 'I'm Punjabi, but can't speak the language, help?', goes on to identify himself as a 'cultured' individual in the thread 'How cultured are you?':

william_walker: [living in] Britain. [speaking] English. British, Italian, Greek, Indian, Chinese [cuisines]. I am a High Church Anglican. Well sure I am interested in geo-political forecasting so I have to know things about other places.

It is clear that for *william_walker*, foreign languages do not form legitimate cultural capital of the internationals, but a taste of exotic cultures do. This is a striking example of post-colonialism in a class fraction purportedly consisted of open-minded individuals.

Embarking on an international career: How to afford a new home?

The third type of ad hoc group in International Lounge emerges in the light of toughened immigration policies in the UK, which increases the need for career advice among international students who aim for subsequent migration. As will be shown, career-related threads become places where student-

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It is striking that Toro89

-

motivation for departure. Student-migrants also perform an individualised communication paradigm, characterised by personalisation of online space, social networking through ad hoc groups and information-based instant interactions.

At the heart of the transnational class reproduction in International Lounge is the function of mobility capital. It is intrinsically transferrable between the education, labour market and online communication fields, as we have seen participants using national and international credentials acquired offline to organise online activities. This suggests that mobility capital permits and demands adaptability of individuals. Nationalism has focused on creating institutions to support the reproduction of the middle class within a coherent national community. However, globalisation and neoliberal capitalism gives rise to decentralisation, and weakens the stable structure and the acquiescing sense of social class. The national societies and international ad hoc groups in this study indeed respond to the lack of social institutions for an emerging transnational class fraction. These networks are created as a result of personal strategies to utilise mobility capital and improvise in response to circumstances arising during their migration journeys. Conceived in this way, social class revolves around the individualistic effort to cross and adapt to fields, rather than the collective effort to enact homogeneity and sustain supremacy.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 I'm Punjabi, but can't speak the language, help?

cake_lover

leema1122: Just have a go as that's what languages are all about it doesn't matter if you make mistakes as that's the whole point and in spoken form many simple mistakes don't really matter tbh and im saying this as I can speak Urdu, Punjabi (and a dialect of them which is mirpuri) French and obviously English too so if u need any help just ask xxxxx

daindian: Speak Bengali then I'll be impressed : P samja

leema1122: Well I want to learn Arabic or Pashto instead :P and I can understand some bits of sylheti and how many languages can u speak ?? xxxx

daindain: Looool no u don't :P and syletti is horrible it's not Bengali :P I speak English, Bengali, German, hindi :P xxxx

leema1122: HUH :/ I don't what?? LOOOOOL im confused is that bit to the Arabic and Pashto part or to understanding sylhetti? and yes I 0.4 (e) 2 (0 01ET Q q 0.8 (h) 41-2 (1 Tf ()Tj E5 (Q q 0.2Q q Tc 410 (1 Tf ()Tj E5

leema1122 (responded to *polpo*): Awwww thank u do you know how to speak any one of them by any chance? Xxxx

polpo (responded to leema1122): I've heard others speak them

leema1122 (responded to polpo): oh I see : P xxxx

polpo: With Pashto however you will have to choose a dialect e.g. Peshawari Pashto because the accents in Pashto are different so kha would mean good but the softer sha would also mean good.

Anymorefor123: Tenu punjabi toh samaj toh ayi hogi na ? Ya nay ? Lmao don't worry I'm pakistani ... Half punjabi and half Pathan and I can kinda speak punjabi but literally don't know a word of Pashto Iol .-. I guess it's just the way your parents being you up learning a language so chill xx you'll learn sooner or later I'm sure. Chinta na kar (I think that was Hindi fmI)

leema1122 (responded to *polpo*): OMG! How do you know about it? As I am learning the peshawari accent as I have links to far related family there xxxx

polpo (responded to *leema1122*): Pashto is quite easy to pick up in terms of vocab and grammar rules, it's just that it's unrepresented in the media which is why most people haven't heard of it.

william walker (responded to SSS_JJJ): Curry is a choice based on free trade. Nothing to do with legacy or culture.

polpo: if you would like to learn Pashto a website exists called www.thepashto.com

leema1122: Polpo :P LMAOOOOO and oh okay d.w about the ethnicity thing but thanks as I will check the link out too xxxx#

cake_lover

Ggmu!: Japanese

SpeedyGonzal: Nigerian but born in UK

childofthesun: Lebanese, but born in US so i have American nationality. Also have Ivorian and French nationality

kcv001: Portuguese!!! ^_^ ... but born in India

Lyrical Prodigy

MoniC255: British born West Indian (Grenada, St.Lucia and Antigua) - with Indian on both parents side, and Chinese from Mums side.

Toddman10:

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