

**A NEW GENERATION OF CHALLENGES:
SEEKING INDEPENDENCE ON AN OXFORD ESTATE¹**

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Introduction: life in the United Kingdom

According to the book *Life in the United Kingdom* issued by the Home Office, ‘Many young people move away from their family home when they become adults but this varies from one community to another’ (2007: 30). Among the community of friends on Barton estate in Oxford that I have come to know, this aspect of life in the UK does not seem to be common, as not only S.P., my main informant, but *all* of his close friends (and the majority of his acquaintances) still live at home with their families, despite all of them having full-time and long-term jobs, and all of them having frequent conversations about moving away from home. One of them recently asked rhetorically, ‘Why haven’t any of us moved out yet? My boss keeps offering me free furniture. We could really do a place up.’ It is clear that this variation in behaviour is not necessarily a matter of tradition or choice, but instead may be a reflection of economic necessity.

Anthropology at home away from home

This article is based on my experiences of living with a self-defined working-class family on Barton estate in Oxford for over one year in total, extending from late 2009 until the present.² Over that time I observed closely the workings of one particular family and also glimpsed a broader view of the current generation of young working-class men while spending time with the family’s two sons and their group of six close friends, currently aged 22 to 25. All of these young men have completed their GCSEs and have since worked in or are currently working in manual labour jobs. At present one of them is working as team manager at a manufacturing plant following a position with a temp agency, while the remaining five are still working in various types of labouring jobs (ranging from general labourer in construction to painting and decorating).

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² This includes one month in September 2009, four months from September through December 2010, and eight months from May through December 2011.

I did not originally intend to conduct fieldwork in this location, but rather took advantage of an opportunity to apply anthropological analysis to my existing living situation. The starting point for the article, therefore, is a convergence of interest in the theories of value in anthropology and in theories of structural inequality, and in my own very personal issue, which is that of living with my boyfriend S.P.'s family because we (and especially he) cannot afford to move out of home. Coming from a different class and national background – I come from a self-defined middle-class family in the United States – and with an education in anthropology, I inevitably noticed some differences in behaviours and attitudes. Therefore, I consider my position to be an example of anthropology at home away from home – conducted in a setting that is filled with close relationships and personal interests, but also somewhat exotic to me, allowing me to observe situations in a way that may be obscured from the people who have lived that way their whole lives.

Although this closeness could raise concerns for the neutrality of such research, it has also had major benefits in terms of access to information. Some anthropologists, including Malcolm Crick (1995) and Margaret Kenna (1995), have found that close relationships can obscure certain information because of intimacy, or, as Crick notes, sometimes it may not be possible to probe into certain areas in order to maintain a good relationship (1995: 187). But in this case I believe that closeness has helped more than it has hindered my knowledge of this group, especially because my connection to them is predicated upon more than just a working relationship. Over time I have been accepted as a member of S.P.'s family and circle of friends, and while I am still able to view situations with the eyes of an outside observer, they treat me as part of their group and my presence does not disturb their behaviour.³ I have been close enough to observe a lot without needing to ask questions, and I have also felt close enough to sometimes ask difficult or uncomfortable questions.⁴

I provide all of this background in the hopes of avoiding a previously common pitfall of anthropological fieldwork and writing: ignoring the role of the researcher in the production of meaning. And yet I also hope not to reach the opposite extreme, that is, focusing too much on my own point of view at the expense of the picture of working-class life in Barton that I intend to share.

³ An obvious exception is the fact that I am female, which means that I have not been able to explore in detail how men may behave when not in the presence of women. Issues of gender, however, are outside the scope of this analysis.

⁴ Ethical concerns could also be raised about, in a sense, doing fieldwork without disclosing my position as an anthropologist. However, the decision to research and write this paper was made in conjunction with the group of young men and with S.P.'s parents, all of whom agreed to take part.

Values: what can we realistically expect out of life?

The mid-twentieth century work of Clyde Kluckhohn is referenced by David Graeber (2001) as foundational towards establishing an anthropological theory of value. Kluckhohn's definition of values is particularly relevant in this situation, for he believed that values are 'conceptions of the desirable', including not only what people do want, but also what they should want (cited in Graeber 2001: 3). A main idea stemming from his research, according to Graeber, is that 'what makes cultures different is not simply what they believe the world to [be] like, but what they feel one can justifiably demand from it' (ibid.: 5). In this context, is the goal of the independence of moving away from home something these young men feel is a justifiable expectation from life? And further, what strategies do they adopt to reach this goal, and what may stand in their way?

Over the last two years I have heard many conversations and discussions about moving away from home, including who might move out with whom to share a house or a flat and what part of Oxford they would like to live in, but none of those involved has been able to make this a reality. This is a problem that appears to be new for this generation. As we will see below, S.P.'s parents, for example, could afford to rent an apartment as young adults and were able to buy a house in Barton in their early twenties while working in similar jobs. Wanting the independence of moving out of home and having the possibility to eventually buy a home are not only things that these young men want, but things that they feel justified in wanting based on the experiences of their own parents, not to mention being influenced by a general sense that this is common in the UK as evidenced by the Home Office's guide to life here.

In addition to the definition of value above, which he calls sociological value, Graeber also identifies two other meanings of the word as used in anthropology: value in an economic sense, i.e. how much things are desired in terms of what would be given up to get them; and value in a linguistic sense, i.e. the meaning and values assigned to words. He argues that attempts to analyse and understand any one of these types of value in isolation has failed because they are, in fact, all related (2001: 1-2). In this case, the relationship between what people do and should desire, and their ability to realize these desires are clearly linked to not only their willingness, but also their ability to pay for them. Changes in the economy at the macro-level are directly impacting the way these young men live, and ultimately their values will be forced to adapt if they continue to be unable to attain their goals. This points to a limitation of maximization theories in economics, which do not address the social factors that shape people's desires.

Giving voice to a shared problem

Despite any hesitations about researching and writing about my friends and the obvious drawbacks that close relationships could have on my ability to be objective, I decided that it would be worthwhile to explore this topic in greater depth in order to analyse the local impact of broader economic trends. But more importantly, I decided to write this article at the encouragement of my friends-cum-research subjects, who believe that their compensation for employment is entirely unfair when compared to the expenses of life, and in some cases compared to the profits of their employers. In this sense, my role as an anthropologist is to give voice to people who may otherwise be excluded from the dominant discourse.

While anthropology as a means to give a voice to its research subjects has been questioned, especially as those subjects are increasingly educated or from parts of our own society, inequalities still exist and some groups have less access to official channels of information exchange. My friends are obviously capable of expressing their own views, as they have done with me, but they do not have easy access to ways of sharing these views with a wider audience. As I mentioned, all of them have GCSEs and some have or are currently attaining trade qualifications, but none of them has gone to university. Their views are thus likely to be underrepresented in academic discourse based on what Bourdieu described as self-exclusion caused by a lack of pedagogic ethos (Jenkins 1992: 67-68). According to S.P., why should they get a degree that they probably wouldn't use when their parents worked with their hands and they probably will too? This attitude has multiple implications. In addition to excluding their views from academic thought, they have also left a door to potential opportunities for the future closed because, without checking first, they assumed it was already locked.

Class struggles through time

Of course this is not an entirely new problem. Awareness of the struggle between classes goes back to Marx and beyond. But recently it seems to have been exacerbated by economic downturn coupled with trends in the concentration of wealth. The notion of a free market, based on the belief that it will benefit 'all those involved economically, politically, socially and even morally', grew out of the work of the Edinburgh economists as far back as the eighteenth century (Carrier 1997: vii), which justifies a situation in which people are no longer responsible to each other, but primarily to profit. This notion was clearly boosted in Britain in the early 1980s under Margaret Thatcher, a period of deregulation and privatisation

that resulted in the worst economic depression since the 1930s (ibid.: 1,7). Thatcher also promoted private home ownership, which likely helped S.P.'s parents in the 1980s but has now been questioned, as many properties ended up being owned by private landlords. S.P. and his friends are not alone in feeling left out of the housing market: a 2011 survey of 20 to 45 year olds reported in the *Guardian* found that three-quarters of those who do not own a property would like to, but two-thirds think they have no chance of being able to buy one (Rawnsley 2011).

The three-bedroom house where I am staying in Barton was bought by S.P.'s parents in 1983 for around £29,500. The price of houses has been rising since the early 1980s while they have been saving to buy this home. They recall that a friend bought a two-bedroom house in 1976 for around £11,000, which at the time was even considered to be too high. Now, prices are almost ten times higher than in 1983, with a three-bedroom house on the same road in Barton currently selling for £230,000. This drastic rise in the cost of housing is much higher than the growth in wages – the average salary of a UK worker has only gone up by four times in the same period, from £6,000 in 1980 to £23,971 today (Swain 2011). S.P.'s parents are worried about us 'youngsters' and ask how we are going to get our foot on the property ladder. Staying at home for the time being is fine, but it's not only S.P. and his friends who talk about moving out: his parents too wish for their own independence, asking with a wink, 'So, when are you going to get your own place?'

While their parents were therefore able to rent apartments as young adults and get on to the property ladder when housing prices were relatively low, S.P. and his friends risk being excluded from these milestones of adulthood and independence since prices have climbed so quickly over the last thirty years of increased access to credit. The impact of inflation on purchasing power has also made saving nearly impossible. According to an article printed in the *Telegraph* in July 2011, in the past year the real wages of the average UK worker fell by over £600 (Wallop 2011), which could represent a month's rent even in Oxford. Living at home, four of the six young men do pay some rent, though this averages out to be less than half of what it would cost to rent a room in a shared house in Oxford, and some months their parents don't even get any rent. Despite such savings, each of the friends often runs out of money from paycheque to paycheque, whether they are paid weekly or monthly.

Where does the money go? Is it wasted and could it be applied more fruitfully toward rent payments or savings? S.P. once said to me, 'What point is it to save when I know that it won't add up to enough to buy something worthwhile? You save for ages and it doesn't seem to go that far. It's better to live in the moment and appreciate things when you can.' This

attitude seems to prevail, with S.P.'s friends frequently joking about spending all of their money on an expensive acquisition or a night out within a day or two of being paid. They often lend each other ten or twenty pounds at the end of the week when one of them is running low. I have participated in this too, for example, buying a Chinese takeaway for everyone to be paid back at a later date. Or sometimes one friend will offer to take another friend out to the pub when the former is low on cash, with a reciprocal night out later on. Such behaviour, while encouraging social cohesion, also exacerbates the difficulty of saving – not reciprocating by sharing when one is relatively well off leads to criticism for stinginess, 'being a tight bastard', as one might say, thus encouraging continued spending. Further, expensive items that offer immediate satisfaction, perhaps offering a sense of increased status, are popular on the estate. Of the core group of six friends, four of them have or have had an iPhone, and many other friends do too. Expensive clothing brands, such as SuperDry Japan, luxuries that I would not indulge in, are popular.

This behaviour is somewhat in contrast to that of their parent's generation. For example, when S.P.'s parents decided to buy a house, they moved back in with the family and lived cheaply, e.g. not going to the pub, not taking taxis, not ordering takeaways, and they were able to save enough money for the down-payment on a house in seven months (around £3000 based on a 90% mortgage). Today, however, at the wages that S.P. and most of his friends make, this would not be even close to possible. As an example, S.P. takes home about £12,000 a year after taxes. Even if he was able to stay at home without paying rent, he could probably save at most about £6000 a year. It would take four years of constant scrimping and saving to save enough for a 90% mortgage on a similar house in Barton today, which is a mortgage that is now hard to come by, as banks have also become more stringent. As S.P. pointed out to me, what is the point in struggling to save money when it will hardly amount to anything, considering that a house like the one his parents bought at his age is now selling for almost twenty times his annual salary?

Seeking independence

These are not people who represent a 'culture of dependency' on government hand-outs. Instead, these young men reject the notion of government support and are disillusioned by politics, generally dismissing political conversation as pointless. They do not participate in elections, another way in which their voices have been excluded, even though technically this is self-exclusion. I have heard them speak very negatively about relying on government benefits. They have commented on this in general with regard to themselves, expressing

feelings of inadequacy at times in the past when they had to claim unemployment benefits, while others say that they have never claimed nor would ever claim, regarding others who have made claims in a negative light. In one particular case a peripheral friend had to move out of her home because of family problems, and she was planning to claim housing benefits. They all talked about this in a derogatory and mocking fashion. Despite not wanting to rely on benefits, they also lament at times that benefits do not seem to be designed to help them, but as they see it primarily support foreigners. This leads, among other things, to their dismissal of government policies.

Rather than being dependent on the state, these men depend on family and friends, and they view their situation as caused at least in part by a growing inequality between the affluent classes and the workers. Numerous studies have shown an increase in the inequality of wages in the UK since the 1970s (e.g. Gosling and Lemieux 2004: 275), and this gap is now at its highest point ever according to a household income survey reported in the *Telegraph* (Wilson 2011). S.P.'s parents attribute the rise in house prices to speculative purchasing by property developers and real estate investors when prices first began to rise in the early 1980's, thus pricing out the locals.

S.P.'s work situation provides a clear example of the impact of the inequality in the housing market. He works as a builder for a property developer. His boss owns multiple properties throughout Oxford and also abroad and allegedly is a multi-millionaire. Although he is said to waste money frequently through poor planning and buying inappropriate materials, he pays S.P. and others who work for him only about £7 an hour, giving meagre and infrequent pay rises that certainly do not keep up with inflation. Ironically perhaps, because of the dynamics of the free market, wages have remained low, while property prices have risen, making it possible for someone who rents apartments to pay his employees little enough per month that they could not afford to rent an apartment of their own.

This reflects clearly the nature of the relationship between workers and capitalists that Marx described in *Capital*. Marx used examples from history and anthropology to show that such an unequal distribution of wealth is not natural or logical, but an accident of history (Bloch 1983: 11). When labour is treated as a commodity, bought and sold on the market, wage levels seem natural and workers do not have any control over them, as the capitalist class controls the means of production (ibid.). Such a situation appears to exist in the relationship described above, with bargaining power clearly in the hands of the employer. S.P. and one of his co-workers have been promised a pay rise for nearly a year which has yet to materialize, yet neither of them is willing to push the matter for fear of losing their job.

Another of the young men worked seven-day weeks for nearly two months in order not to disappoint his boss for similar reasons. Yet another was injured on the job when he was asked to do something outside the health and safety regulations, yet he was unwilling to ask for compensation because he was so concerned about job stability. S.P. and his friends do not have intimate knowledge of such academic studies related to class, yet his family and friends recognise the impact of the broader economy and the class structure on their living situation; the problem is that there is no clear solution.

Conclusion: looking towards the future

If I ask how they think about the future, more often than not I am told simply that they don't. As I mentioned earlier, my friends have decided to live life in the present and appreciate things as and when they can. Sometimes this involves a lot of partying. Max Weber wrote, in an article called 'The End of Capitalism?':

The religious root of the modern economic outlook is dead; and the concept of a 'calling' is a relic in the world of today. Ascetic religiosity has been displaced by a pessimistic though by no means ascetic view of the world. [...]

The working class could accept its lot so long as the promise of eternal happiness was held out to it. When this consolation disappeared it was inevitable that society would begin to show the strains and stresses which have grown so rapidly since then. (1983: 158)

If previously religion was the opiate of the masses, in England today one might say that beer is the opiate of the masses, especially as, like opium, it is a depressant.

On a more optimistic note, these young men have also been able to cope with uncertainty about the future and lack of independence in the present by making their family home like their own. They are lucky (as am I) in that S.P.'s parents are very generous and welcoming. Their home is a hub of social life for these young men. When low on cash, they frequently share crates of beer around the conservatory table, joking that 'the res', as they call it, is their own private pub.

But this situation is not forever and talk of moving away from home still abounds. Of course nerves are often frayed, with adult children, parents, girlfriends and other friends frequently occupying the same small spaces. One friend noted to me that one solution is to band together and rent a shared house, or eventually pair up and rent or buy a place with a partner. He told me that his mom could not have afforded to buy their house on her small salary as a school aide and it was made possible only because she shared the bills with her husband, a coach driver. A traditional solution to moving up the social ladder has been to

‘marry out’, and in fact four of the six have dated women from the middle or upper classes. I do not believe that this is an intentional strategy, but when it happens the man involved is likely to become the butt of jokes, his friends questioning whether family money is the only reason for dating such a woman. Possibly I too could be part of the solution for S.P., but nowadays, as economic problems continue to worsen, I myself am starting to worry that such a goal may be out of reach for me as well.

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