Chapter 2

HOW THE WHITE WORKING CLASS BECAME ‘CHAV’

The making of whiteness in an Essex FE College

1. CHAV IN POPULAR CULTURE

The term ‘chav’ has become central in popular English discourse concerning fractions of the white working class (and sometimes the white working class as a whole) and it has recently entered the Oxford English Dictionary. Like its American equivalent ‘white trash’, ‘chav’ and its various derivatives (in Scotland ‘Neds’ and in other parts of England ‘townies’) chav is a term of abuse which identifies a subject with excessive consumption of items such as Burberry baseball caps, fast food and cheap jewellery with no taste, little education and anti-social behaviour patterns. Occasionally, the term can be used as a faux compliment, but for the most part its use is derogatory. In the British media, ‘chav’ is used as a term of abuse for the working class and also celebrities who have working class roots (such as David and Victoria Beckham and Michael Collins the lottery winner and multi-millionaire who is known as the ‘King of the Chavs’). There are websites that mock chav activities such as chavscum.com and ‘chav bops’ where ruling class whites adopt chav slang and dress. As a racialised (but not racist) epithet, Chav applies predominantly to the white working class but can also be applied to people of colour – particularly to those working class people racialised as Asian or mixed race. The etymology of the term suggests that it was not originally a word associated with those identified as native British working class. ‘Chav’ originates from the Romany word for ‘friend’ and other
substitutions of the term such as ‘pikey’ or ‘gippo’ (both abusive terms referring to Travellers, the latter being a pejorative of Gypsy) were earlier used to describe the white underclass. This suggests that a racialised term for another white group was transferred to the English white working class in their own re-racialisation.

In this chapter I focus on the circumstances of a particular group of FE (Further Education) students in their transition to HE (Higher Education). This was part of a wider study into the factors which might facilitate or inhibit progression into HE for working class students in non-metropolitan areas. The students were white, working class students studying GNVQ at Thameside College at the time in which ‘chav’ was just starting to be used as a general term of abuse for the white working class (1998–2000). GNVQ (The General National Vocational Qualification) was an advanced course of study which represented one of the UK government’s more recent attempts to rehabilitate vocational education and place it on the same standing with academic qualifications. More recently, this qualification has been replaced with the AVCE (Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education), but substantively the qualifications occupy the same position in providing a route for ‘non-academic’ students to continue their studies outside of the workplace. The area in which Thameside was based was considered by nearby HE providers as a ‘cool spot’ for HE participation more generally. In this chapter I particularly consider how the white working class has been pathologised in educational practices and policy discourse. Therefore, I begin this chapter with a more general discussion of race and class and the current positioning of these variables in English education policy. This introduction of theories of racialisation and whiteness is necessary in order to understand the specific situation of these students. In particular, the field in which capitals are exchanged and valued, rather than capitals being of any intrinsic value of themselves (Colley, 2003), is of paramount importance. This includes not only the FE College but the policy and historical context in which the college and its students are located.

I start by discussing how whiteness and ‘class’ have always been historically intimately associated and how in policy terms ethnic aspects of class have been highlighted and pathologised. This includes a pathologisation of working class white areas, such as the area around Thameside College. I then consider how through processes of ‘community profiling’ the management of Thameside decide upon and act to valorise discrimination against working class students of all ethnicities, including the white working class. This ‘cools off’ student expectations regarding their progression to HE (Banks, 1992).