

*Antagonism and overdetermination: the production of student positions in contrasting undergraduate disciplines and institutions in the UK.*

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*ABSTRACT: Based on data drawn from an empirical research project in four UK universities, this article presents a picture of student positions in undergraduate classes as a product of the relationship between the discursive fields of discipline, institution and gender. It begins by providing a description of some contrasting features of academic disciplines, and then identifies ways in which these features conflict with features of other discursive fields, to marginalize specific students or groups of students. The article draws on the conceptual vocabulary of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to argue that where features of discursive fields overlap, social identities are overdetermined, while where features of discursive fields conflict, social identities are placed in an antagonistic and unstable relation to social and symbolic systems.*

## **Introduction**

The aim of this article is to present a picture of the field of student positions within UK higher education institutions. The picture presented here suggests that student positions, and the field of higher education as a whole, can be understood as a product of intersections between institutional cultures, gender regulations, and the socially situated codes of specific academic disciplines.

This article draws on a piece of empirical research comparing disciplines and institutions within the UK higher education system. The sites that formed the empirical object of the research were American Literature and Political Thought modules on undergraduate degree courses. I observed a series of sessions on two American Literature and two Political Thought modules, in two traditional, highly selective universities (West University and North University) and in two ‘new’, access oriented

universities (South University and East University). The research design thus enabled me to compare the same discipline in universities with different positions in relation to social inclusion, and also to make comparisons across disciplines that occupy very different positions in relation to existing power structures. American Literature explicitly addresses issues of class, ethnicity and gender within the curriculum and takes a generally critical approach to the analysis of social hierarchies. Political Thought, in contrast, can be described as a normative, rather than a descriptive discipline, and as such does not construct a critical analysis of existing power structures, but rather seeks to provide an account of justifiable forms of government. I participated in a series of at least six sessions on each of the four modules. I videoed the sessions and interviewed students and tutors about the discussions that I had observed. The central section of each interview was based on extracts from the transcripts of the classes, and the questions were aimed at eliciting the views of the participants on the nature of the discipline they were studying, through their direct articulation of issues and concepts that had arisen during class discussions. The selection of these sites was thus intended to enable the analysis of academic disciplines as articulated within contrasting social and educational settings, in order to reveal how the discipline and setting each contribute to the positioning of students within class discussions.

Through the analysis of this observational and interview data, a relational picture of student positions was developed. The analysis foregrounds the interdependent relationship between gender, academic discipline and institution in the production of positions available to students. To do this, gender, discipline and institution are each conceptualised as relatively stable, relatively autonomous discursive fields in relation to which students are positioned and position themselves when they contribute to class discussions. The resulting student positions can thus be seen as a product of the overlap between features of different discursive fields. This conceptualisation is framed within a theoretical understanding of society as constituted through the overdetermination of social fields and identities.

There are several distinct sources of the concept of ‘overdetermination’. One use of the term is more Freudian and one is more Althusserian. Freud’s use of the term refers to sources of affects in individual human subjects. Althusser, in contrast, uses the term to explain the nature of change at a socio-historical level. In the original psychoanalytic usage, different sources of symptoms of affect are united within the ego’s attempt to unify the contradictory forces within the individual. Thus, although these sources may be derived from different experiences, the object of their representation in the production of any instance of affect is unified (Freud, 1900). This contrasts with Althusser’s use of the concept, which emphasises the autonomy of different social fields in the production of any historical change (Althusser, 1962, see also Jameson, 1981, and Callinicos, 1989, pp. 128 – 132). Althusser explicitly rejects the Hegelian model of the dialectic as an ‘expressive totality’ driven by one ‘internal spiritual principle’ (Althusser, 1962, p. 103). These two uses of the concept of overdetermination would appear to operate at quite different levels of analysis, the psychic and the socio-historical. However, recent developments within social theory offer a fuller articulation of the relationship between the two conceptual levels (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, Mocnic, 1993, Žizek, 1989).

In each of these recent formulations the concept of overdetermination is based on the incompleteness of both subjective and social identities as constituted within an overarching social or symbolic system. Within the limiting structures of the symbolic or social order, neither a human subject or a social field can ever be fully constituted. Thus, it is not the case that gender, discipline or institution can be conceptualised as autonomous discursive fields that are already fully constituted when they interact with a specific historical and social context. Rather, the very constitution of Political Thought or American Literature is only realisable within a particular institutional context and in relation to particular gendered hierarchies, and therefore neither discipline is ever fully realisable as a separate identity. Similarly, the gender of an individual student is always negotiated within a particular classroom context, and in relation to a particular disciplinary methodology and culture: to attempt to delimit what counts as feminine or masculine without reference to the specificities of different

contexts is therefore a misleading, totalising move. Even the attempt to define multiple femininities, within this conceptual framework, is doomed to failure, as Laclau and Mouffe suggest:

... the dispersion of subject positions cannot constitute a solution: given that none of them manages to consolidate itself as a *separate position*, there is a game of overdetermination among them that reintroduces the horizon of an impossible totality. (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 121 – 122)

However, this move does not belie any form of description or analysis: ‘The impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise the very flow of differences would be impossible’ (ibid, p. 112). Such fixity occurs, Laclau and Mouffe suggest, when a set of meanings, such as different forms of sexual difference, express a common relation within a specific symbolic system:

... while it is absolutely correct to question the idea of an original sexual division represented a posteriori in social practices, it is also necessary to recognise that overdetermination among the diverse sexual differences produces a systematic effect of sexual *division*. Every construction of sexual differences, whatever their multiplicity and heterogeneity, invariably constructs the feminine as a pole sub-ordinated to the masculine ... The ensemble of social practices, of institutions and discourses which produce woman as a category, are not completely isolated but mutually reinforce and act upon one another. (ibid, p. 117 – 118)

This suggests that it is possible to understand a multiplicity of social instances in terms of a similarity in their symbolic position, which thus overdetermines and fixes the social divisions instantiated in each separate instance. Alternatively, where a contradiction exists between social instances or discursive fields, the effect of overdetermination can be to reinforce the fragility or marginality, rather than the fixity, of certain terms. This antagonism occurs where ‘the presence of the Other prevents me from being totally myself’ (ibid, p. 125). Thus while the dispersal of different performances of

femininity coincide to overdetermine and fix the meaning of sexual difference, in some contexts, specific instances of femininity will be in an antagonistic relationship to other discursive practices. This kind of antagonism exists, for example, between academic and feminine performances in the classroom, where each of these identities can prevent the other from 'being totally itself'. In instances of both overdetermination and antagonism, meanings are produced within the context of a dominant signifying system. Thus it is possible to conceptualise subjectivities, or discursive fields as essentially incomplete identities, made meaningful but never fully realised within an essentially limited symbolic order. These identities, while incomplete and fragile, nevertheless provide a meaningful structure for analysis.

There are, importantly, two relationships with the 'Other'. The first instantiation of the other is the symbolic system as a whole. All meanings, or identities, are only brought into language in relation to this symbolic system, and as such are only ever relatively autonomous or stable. As I have suggested, what fixes meaning is a common relation within the symbolic system. However, distinct identities or discursive fields within the symbolic system also act as reference points or boundaries to meaning. Thus while the symbolic similarity between instances *within* the discursive fields of, for example, academic practice or feminine performances acts to stabilise the identity of each field, the interaction *between* fields can constitute each as the an antagonistic other, threatening even the relative stability offered within the symbolic order.

In this article I hope to demonstrate how the discursive fields of Political Thought and American Literature interact with both regulations of gender and institutional cultures to overdetermine either the inclusion or marginalisation of students in undergraduate classrooms. At the same time, I will suggest, the identity and social position of the disciplines themselves are either fixed or destabilised through their interaction with these other discursive fields. In order to do this I will first set out some contrasting features of the structure of legitimate knowledge in the two disciplines. Then I will describe how these features of the disciplines either coincide or conflict with features of other discursive fields, to produce either included or marginalized student positions.

## **Contrasting features of Political Thought and American Literature**

There are three socially significant contrasting features in the structure of legitimate knowledge in American Literature and Political Thought. The first of these is their contrasting social functions and relationship to the dominant social order. The second significant contrast between the two disciplines is in their modes of reasoning. The different modes of reasoning are related to the third feature I will describe, which is the way the disciplines use text or data in the construction of legitimate knowledge claims. I will also refer to the legitimacy of the use of more than one methodology within the disciplines: Political Thought having one clearly dominant methodology while American Literature explicitly incorporates a variety of different approaches.

### *The social positioning of the disciplines*

Pierre Bourdieu, in his analysis of the academic field in France (1996), identified two broad categories of academic discipline, defined in terms of their social function. The first category includes disciplines such as Law and Medicine whose legitimacy is dependent on their social function and that lead to dominant positions within social and political hierarchies. The second category includes disciplines such as the pure Arts and Sciences, that are dependent on scientific or intellectual values to establish their legitimacy, and that do not necessarily lead to powerful positions within social hierarchies. Bourdieu's findings suggest that the first category of disciplines, specifically Medicine and Law, has recruited the highest percentage of academics and students from the dominant social classes, while disciplines in the second category, specifically the Arts and Pure Sciences have recruited the lowest percentages from the classes of the establishment (Bourdieu, 1996, Huber, 1990). This distinction, then, provides a useful way of identifying disciplines that might be expected to be more socially exclusionary and those that might be expected to be more inclusive. The disciplines selected for this study can be categorised in accordance with Bourdieu's distinction 'knowledge in the service of order and power' (ibid, p. 68) and knowledge 'aiming not at putting public affairs in order but at analysing them as they are' (ibid, p. 69). Political Theory, I will argue, can be identified with the first of these categories, while American Literature can be identified with the second.

There are different ways of conceptualising the study of Political Theory, or Political Thought. It can be described as a way of developing analytical skills and conceptual frameworks. It can also be thought of as the history of ideas, dealing with an empirical set of canonical texts. However, what distinguishes Political Theory from other analytical and historical disciplines is its fundamental relationship to issues of government:

Political philosophy asks how the state should act, what moral principles should govern the way it treats its citizens and what kind of social order it should seek to create. (Swift, 2001, p. 5)

Political theory, then, does not set out to describe the state, or the political system, but rather to justify it. This way of understanding Political Theory, or Political Philosophy, positions it clearly within the category of temporally dominant disciplines, serving to rationalise governmental activity. Political Theory sees itself as clarifying the conceptual basis on which politicians may justify their actions. Following Bourdieu's findings, then, we might expect to find more interest in the field of political theory from students from the dominant classes. Although the study of political theory may not lead as directly into structurally dominant positions as the study of law or medicine, it nevertheless carries with it associations of government and power that are more likely to be instinctively understood by those with some relation to similarly powerful positions. My hypothesis, in setting up this study, was that differences in students' position in relation to power and authority might affect their mode of interaction with political theory as a discipline.

There is more variety in, or dispute between, conceptions of literary criticism than conceptions of Political Thought. The main opposition within literary studies can be characterised as that between New Criticism and the multi-methodological, historicist or cultural studies approaches prevalent today. The approaches of New Criticism prioritise close readings of texts and scholarly knowledge of the canon. These approaches can be seen to fit into Bourdieu's category of disciplines that serve the

interests of power, in so far as they treat literary texts as aesthetic objects with inherent moral value, and knowledge of canonical texts is seen as enhancing understanding of the world and therefore the legitimacy of individuals within dominant positions<sup>1</sup>. This conceptualisation of literary analysis, emphasising the aesthetic and moral value inhering in individual works, can be opposed to historicist readings, which foreground political interpretations of literary texts. A broad definition of historicist approaches incorporates Marxist and feminist readings, and readings which prioritise issues of ethnicity and racism. These readings draw on sociological, psychoanalytic and political theory, and tend to attach greater significance to the unconscious role of language in ideological reproduction than to its aesthetic and moral value. These approaches, in attempting to describe the ideological production and effects of literary texts, come within Bourdieu's second category: disciplines that do not have a function in supporting the status quo, but which, in their production of descriptions of the existing social order, are implicitly politicised and critical. The American Literature courses in my study are situated within this multi-methodological school of literary studies, and thus present a contrast, within Bourdieu's categories, to the Political Theory courses.

#### *Disciplinary modes of reasoning and uses of texts*

There are distinct differences between legitimate modes of reasoning in American Literature and Political Thought. Political Thought tends to develop concepts through the analysis of 'core' definitions of terms. In general it is this analysis of 'normal' or 'everyday' language use to identify coherent and consistent uses of terms that is that basis for arguments within the discipline. Within the UK Political Thought curriculum this type of analysis is generally prioritised over the interpretation or close examination of canonical texts. In American Literature, in contrast, concepts are understood precisely through the development of associations constructed in the analysis of set texts: less time or value is attributed to the analysis of de-contextualised linguistic terms. This difference between the disciplines can be illustrated in the way the concept of slavery was approached in two of the observed classes.

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<sup>1</sup> For characterisations of New Criticism, see Colebrook, 1997, p. 222, or Culler, 1997, p. 122. For a more detailed account of the inter-relationships between New Criticism and Historicism, see Currie, 1998.

In the West University class on Rousseau the concept of slavery was used to explore the relative values of equality and freedom. Different core definitions of slavery were articulated to produce different ways of conceptualising freedom. The first core definition explored in the class was the lack of employment choices and the concurrent poor working conditions associated with slavery. Expanding from this definition, students made a connection between slaves and factory or sweat shop workers, and used this to conceptualise freedom as a guiding principle for government. During the discussion one student extended slaves' lack of economic power to include more general limitations on individuals in the employment market. While her suggestion that salaried employment constitutes a kind of slavery was largely rejected by the rest of the class, her point did initiate a discussion of the relativity of concepts such as freedom. The exploration of another core feature of slavery led the discussion in a slightly different direction. One student pointed out that the dependence of the slave on their master for subsistence, an integral feature of slavery, does not necessarily incur hardship. If you have a rich and generous master, she argued, slavery might be preferable to freedom. By foregrounding different core definitions of slavery, students were able to develop different ways of conceptualising principles and priorities that should guide government. Each of these analyses, however, is based on a narrow chain of reasoning using core definitions of linguistic terms to develop concepts.

The contrast in methodologies in the two disciplines can be illustrated by comparing the discussion of slavery in the Political Thought class with the discussion of conceptions of slavery and freedom in one of the American Literature classes. The set texts for this session were the slave narratives written by Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. These autobiographical descriptions of American slavery raised issues relating to literacy and sexuality that initiated associative conceptualisations of freedom and slavery. Jacobs' narrative explores the way sexuality is distorted within slavery, asking:

Why does a slave ever love? Why allow the tendrils of the heart to twine around objects which may at any moment be wrenched away by the hand of violence?

(Jacobs, 1716, p. 1761)

Douglass' account, in contrast, foregrounds the way access to literacy played a key role in his struggle for freedom. He describes the occasion when he first realised the significance of literacy, when his master forbade his mistress to teach Douglass:

“If you teach a nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave...” ... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.

(Frederick Douglass, 1845, p. 2054)

The narratives, therefore, foreground features of slavery that are not core definitions within everyday usage of the term, and both literacy and sexuality were central to the conceptualisation of slavery within the North University class. This exploration of new associations introduced via a third term, or text, constitutes a form of legitimate knowledge about slavery that is not explored in the discussion in the Political Thought class.

These different modes of reasoning have social effects. The narrow analytic chains that are the dominant approach of the Political Thought class tend to exclude the possibility that several interpretations of concepts can be seen as equally valid, and can thus be associated with a combative style of interaction, within which arguments are seen as necessarily in opposition to each other. This combative style of interaction is exacerbated by the fact that the object of study in UK Political Thought classes tends to be the argument itself, rather than an external empirical object, and thus students are required to articulate their ideas and opinions directly, rather than being able to offer their views mediated through the interpretation of a source text. These features, I will suggest, can be associated with the position of the discipline as applied knowledge in the service of government and

with a dominant, masculine position in relation to language and the symbolic order. Students who are not able to identify with social positions within which Political Thought is used as applied knowledge or who do not occupy a dominant position in the existing social order are likely to be marginalized in some way within the class.

In contrast, American Literature's more associative mode of reasoning permits multiple interpretive possibilities that are not viewed as oppositional to each other. In addition, as I have noted, analysis within contemporary American Literature incorporates a range of other disciplinary methodologies. Discussion in the classes I observed drew on the traditional literary approaches of New Criticism and close textual analysis, but also used approaches developed from the study of history and from social, psychoanalytic and feminist theory. The more open interpretive possibilities within American Literature combined with the discipline's adoption of multiple methodological approaches constitute a wide variety of different possible modes through which students can identify with the discipline. These factors, combined with an understanding of American Literature's explicit analysis of class, gender and racial thinking, and its critical descriptive position in relation to social hierarchies, constitute an account of the social position of the discipline that contrasts with Political Thought's narrower methodology and far closer identification with the exclusive codes of the establishment.

### **Social effects of disciplinary knowledge structures**

My analysis identifies a relationship between these features of the disciplines and student inclusion at three different levels: individual students' conflicts with disciplinary objects or methodologies; conflicts between gender regulations and disciplinary objects or methodologies; and conflicts between institutional cultures and disciplinary objects or methodologies. Such conflicts put students into an antagonistic relationship with the discipline they are studying. Where, in contrast, features of the discipline overlap with the features of other discursive fields regulating classroom interaction, students' inclusion in relation to the discipline is overdetermined.

### *Individual conflicts with disciplinary methodologies*

Some individual students came to class with certain interests, political commitments or ways of thinking that did not conform to the methodology of the discipline they were studying. This meant that some of their contributions were not treated as legitimate or central to the topic being discussed in the class. For example, Michael, a student in the West University Political Thought class, expressed a consistent critical left position that was not consistent with the object and dominant methodology of the discipline. In a class on Mill, for example, he wanted to explore the racist connotations of Mill's use of the term 'barbarian'. Both the tutor and other students in the group rejected this attempt to analyse the implicit connotations of Mill's language, which deviated from the classes' exploration of Mill's explicit definition of freedom. Another student closed this section of discussion, commenting decisively 'You can have barbarians and free intelligent people of the same race... Does barbarian have an ethnic definition? It doesn't. Historically perhaps'. A refutation that makes an explicit distinction between essential, or core definitions and historical, context specific or associative definitions, and implicitly prioritises core definitions over associative ones.

Michael's marginalized position can be defined by the different possible ways of approaching the central concepts of the discipline: either by analysing the concepts as internally coherent abstract ideas or by analysing them as socially constructed objects. Included positions within Political Thought are partly defined by the prioritisation of the possible coherence of concepts as abstract ideas. The distinction between these two approaches is illustrated again in the following brief extract where the West University class was discussing the notion of 'ideals':

179. Mark: In order to have government you have to have ideals, to direct your will.

180. Michael: That's one way of looking at it.

181. Mark: What would yours be?

182. Michael: The other way of looking at it is that when you're in government you do what's best for your interest.

183. Mark: Right.

184. Michael: You tell everybody you're following ideals.

(West University, Rousseau 2)

The distinction, to re-iterate, is between the desire to define ideals such as 'freedom' and 'equality' as coherently and precisely as possible in order to guide action (Mark's position, 179) and the desire to reveal the way such supposed ideals are constructs manipulated by those in power (Michael's position, 182, 194). Michael's position puts him in conflict with both the object and the dominant methodology of the discipline. Similar conflicts between individual student positions and disciplinary methodology were also identified in one of the observed American Literature classes.

*Conflicts between gendered and disciplinary regulations.*

There is a general conflict between codes regulating performances of femininity and codes regulating successful academic performances (see, for example, Thomas, 1990, Walkerdine, 1998). However, the specific structure of disciplinary methodologies can either exacerbate or mitigate this conflict. The structure of Political Thought, as I have already suggested, tends to exacerbate conflicts between gendered and academic performances for female students. This does not mean, however, that female students necessarily performed less competently than their male peers within the classroom. There is, though, some evidence that even successful participation in the Political Thought classes entailed some conflict for female students.

Rachel, a student in the West University Political Thought class, participated frequently in class discussions. She was able to defend her position in discussions articulately and coherently. However, in her interview she did not portray her participation in class discussions in a very positive light. She said:

I'm always a bit of a talker, so I'll speak before I think, whereas there are some people who are very good and keep quiet and then make a valid point ... Like I say, I speak quite a bit, but that's because you can never get me in a room with other people and shut me up.

(Rachel, West University, interview)

This account requires some explanation. Despite Rachel's claim that she doesn't think before she speaks, her actual contributions in the sessions are intelligent and relevant. Why, then, does she feel the need to portray herself in such a negative way? I would argue that her description constructs her participation in a way that is highly feminised. She says 'there are some people who are very good and keep quiet', constructing her own mode of participation, in opposition to this, as somehow 'bad' and uncontrolled. She also describes herself as 'a bit of a talker' adding, 'you can never get me in a room with other people and shut me up.' This corresponds to the feminised stereotype of the chatterbox, whose talk is uncontrolled and inconsequential. One explanation of the inconsistency between her actual performance and her account of her performance is the conflict between the codes of appropriate classroom behaviour, which construct participation as a criterion of academic success, and the codes of gender behaviour, within which assertive articulation of your own ideas is identified as masculine rather than feminine. Within the classroom, Rachel's interventions are more consistent with codes of academic discourse than with the codes regulating feminine performances. The interview setting, however, does not require the same kind of performance as the classroom: it does not constitute the same kind of conflict between academic and feminine performances. As a conversation between two people, it does, however, conform to gendered codes regulating legitimate modes of self-presentation. These complex and flexible codes might suggest, for example, that it is not appropriately feminine for a woman to appear too confident, or to brag about academic achievements. This might explain why the account Rachel gives in her interview explicitly feminises the masculine features of her performance within the class, by relating her feelings of inadequacy and lack of control. We cannot, of course, judge from her account her 'true' feelings about her classroom participation. We might suspect that since in fact her contributions in class are relevant and intelligent, it is likely that there are at least some occasions when she feels happy with what she has said, however, she did not describe those occasions in her interview. It is worth noting that most, if not all, of the male students I interviewed described their classroom participation in far more positive terms:

specifically noting and even on occasion enhancing the quantity as well as the quality of their contributions.

I have suggested that the conflict between academic and gender performances was exacerbated by the structure of Political Thought, which prioritises the expression of students' ideas and opinions over the description of an external object or text. This point can be illustrated in a description of the participation of Laura, a student in the South University Political Thought class. Laura was completely silent in class. In her interview, though, she was able to articulate her ideas on the topics discussed in class. However, even in the interview, she expressed herself very hesitantly, frequently interrupting herself to comment 'oh, this is really bad, oh god', and she said that she felt uncomfortable articulating her political position in the class. She worried that other people in the class, and especially the tutor, would disagree with her. However, when she began to describe a case she had studied in her Law course she became slightly more fluent, explaining the facts of the case and why she had found it interesting. In discussing the motivations and moral dilemmas of the litigants in the case, Laura was not required to explicitly question or justify her own views, and this might have contributed to her greater confidence at this point. It seems plausible to suggest that the example cases used in Law provide a buffer against the expression of your own views that is not available in the Political Thought classes. So, I would argue, both in its use of narrow chains of reasoning based on core definitions and in its prioritisation of abstract reasoning over the description of text or data, undergraduate Political Thought can be associated with more assertive modes of interaction that conflict with the discursive regulations of femininity.

While female students in all classes I observed appeared to experience similar conflicts, the female students I interviewed in the Political Thought classes articulated the contradictions that I have described more consistently than the American Literature students. In addition, in the American Literature classes female students appeared to participate more frequently than those in the Political Thought classes, and there were clear sections of class discussions where female students engaged more than the male students in the American Literature class.

*Conflicts between institutional cultures and disciplinary methodologies*

Within the study, the comparison across institutions was slightly different in the two disciplines. The Politics departments represented the two extremes of the UK university system: West University was highly selective, very prestigious, and in the class that I observed all of the students had either been privately educated or had at least one parent educated to post-graduate level. South University was access oriented, had far lower entrance criteria than West University, and in the class that I observed none of the students for whom information was available had been privately educated and only one had one parent educated to post graduate level. The two English departments were both slightly less extreme. North University was highly selective and prestigious, but had an explicit access policy and a large proportion of students were drawn from the ethnically diverse local community, many of whom were also the first generation of their family to go into higher education. The East University English department had similar entrance criteria to the South University Politics department, but had a slightly better academic reputation than Politics at South University. The class that I observed had a high proportion of mature students and students for whom English was a second language. It is perhaps, then, unsurprising that the observed differences between institutions were more extreme in the comparison between Politics classes than between the American Literature classes. Nevertheless I would argue that some of the differences in the institutional comparison are also related to disciplinary factors.

The students' approaches to reading can be used as an exemplar of institutional differences in the production of student positions. As I have suggested, the South and West University Political Thought groups are vastly different in terms of the social and educational background of the students. These differences affect both individual and institutional practices in relation to the course reading. In West University there was a clear and justified expectation that students would have done some reading for each of their seminars. One or two students were required to do a presentation each week, but a majority of the students who weren't doing the presentation also appeared to have done at least some of the reading, and those who hadn't would apologise or express embarrassment. Students'

descriptions of their reading practices in several interviews re-iterated the shared assumption that in most cases students would have read both primary and secondary sources. The assumptions about reading in South University were dramatically different. Neither the lecturer nor the students assumed that the students would do any reading prior to the seminar. The students I interviewed expressed an extreme lack of confidence in their ability to understand the reading on their own, but they also suggested that they had not made a sustained effort to do so. One student said ‘I haven’t really attempted to [do any reading before the class], but I don’t know if I would understand’. There is, however, no evidence from my data that these students’ extreme lack of confidence in their reading skills is simply or directly related to actual literacy abilities, and it is worth noting that one of the West University students who always completed the reading was dyslexic, and found both reading and writing both slow and difficult. These differences in reading practices correlate with the contrasting levels of confidence, articulacy and deference to authority observed in the two universities.

There was far less difference in modes of participation in the two American Literature classes. As I have suggested, this may in part be explained by the fact that the social composition of the classes was more similar in the two English departments than in the Politics departments. However, it is also significant that the culture of literary studies prioritises textual analysis, so reading the set text is seen by both students and tutors as the primary requirement for participation. It would appear, then, that institutional and disciplinary factors combined to produce significant differences between the modes of participation in the two Political Thought classes. A similar combination of institutional and disciplinary factors, I would argue, contributed to the greater similarities in interaction in the American Literature classes.

### **Antagonism and overdetermination: a relational picture of student positions**

What I have tried to present here is a brief description of students’ positions as constituted in relation to the discipline they are studying, the institution in which they are studying, and hegemonic codes of masculinity and femininity. Each of these discursive fields is conceptualised as an incomplete

identity, instantiated within specific contexts which overdetermine different aspects of student positions. The analysis indicates how specific student positions appear to be produced in relation to both different institutions and different disciplines.

Political Thought, it has been suggested, constructs antagonisms in relation to feminine positions and in relation to the culture of South University and its students. Codes of appropriate feminine behaviour are in opposition to the criteria of assertiveness and self-expression associated with both the social position and the methodological structure of Political Thought. Similarly, low expectations in terms of reading and student participation within South University Political Thought produced a culture of deference to both tutor and text that was in conflict with the dominant mode of engagement with the concepts and language of the discipline. Meanwhile, the academic success of upper middle class male West University students and the identity of Political Thought as a discipline of the governing classes overdetermine each other. This has produced a depressing picture of the re-iteration of social hierarchies of both gender and class within undergraduate Political Thought classes. The marginalisation of both female students and new university students, it has been suggested, is overdetermined by the position of Political Thought as a discipline closely related to the establishment and to socially dominant positions, both in terms of its subject matter and in terms of its narrow methodological structure.

In contrast the multiple interpretive methods and descriptive or critical subject matter of American Literature combined with the relatively access oriented admissions policies of both North and East University appear to produce a more egalitarian array of student positions, despite the difference in entry qualifications required by the two universities. Thus, despite the generic antagonisms between academic discourse and feminine positions, the marginalisation of specific groups of students was not as apparent in the American Literature classes as in the Political Thought classes. It would appear, then, that when similarly politicised features of different discursive fields overlap, the effects of the stark divide within our university system, which tends to simply reproduce existing social divisions, may be mitigated. The critical, politicised position of American Literature and the explicit

opportunities it offers within the curriculum to address issues of gender, class and racial thinking through a variety of legitimate methodologies are complemented by the intake of universities that have a positive approach to widening participation. The intentions of widening participation, in turn, are complemented by the varied methodological approaches and politicised curriculum content of American Literature.

In both cases we can describe the findings of this study as observations of the dispersal of a multiplicity of social instances that coalesce around a shared signifying position in relation to the symbolic order. The explicit politicisation of practice can be identified as a signifying position shared by both access-oriented higher education institutions and contemporary approaches to literary and cultural analysis. The findings of the study represented here suggest that this shared signifying position can have productive effects in relation to equity and participation in higher education, in so far as it can overdetermine the codification and stabilisation of previously marginal and unstable student positions. In contrast, the description of antagonisms within undergraduate Political Thought classes identifies weaknesses in the overall symbolic articulation of the field. The differential positioning of different social groups in the Political Thought classes reveals the inconsistency of claims to autonomy and equity made in relation to both disciplinary curricula and institutions. The interdependent, privileged positions represented by both West University male students and the disciplinary field of Political Thought are in part maintained by this illusion of autonomy, which conceals their privileged status. This assertion of autonomy, however, is destabilised by the revelation of contradictory inequalities in the comparative positions of both students and disciplines in relation to the social.

Contradictions within the discursive fields of gender, disciplines and institutions can, then, be identified at two levels: firstly in relation to claims of equity within current higher education systems and curricula; and secondly in relation to claims to autonomy and independence made on behalf of academic disciplines, higher education institutions and their students. Such claims can be described as antagonistic, because in order to sustain them, other identities – in particular the identities of students

from subordinate social groups – must be symbolised in ways that repress significant features of their social constitution. What is needed is a re-codification of these subordinate positions. The analysis of the American Literature classes in the research presented here suggests that, at least in some highly specific contexts, such a re-codification is not an unrealistic political objective.

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