Educational Upward Mobility from Precarious Backgrounds: Studying as a Process of Ontological Assurance*

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Abstract

This article argues that educational journeys which encourage independence and diversity can lead to greater success in education. Students who have experienced a large degree of precariousness in their childhoods and youths are able to find assurance through studying in universities that provide scope for seeking truth. Therefore, the organisation of universities is crucial for upward social mobility. Examples of three reconstructed life histories gained through biographical-narrative interviews with university graduates from working classes in England and Austria, explain and demonstrate relations between seeking truth and gaining ontological assurance. The design of higher education institutions is crucial for providing scope in seeking truth. Therefore, four suggestions for a change in university policies towards inclusive education institutions covering the creation of study programs, staff and student body, higher education policies and finance are offered.

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1. Introduction

Over the last decades, universities have changed tremendously. Higher education organisations developed from an elite institution, offering a large extent of purpose free, general scholarship to a little share of the population, into organizations preparing masses for employability. This paper is part of a larger self-funded study on educational upward mobility of former working-class people[1] and seeks to draw attention to a special social group within this study: working-class students from precarious backgrounds, and their ways through universities. Other studies in the perspective of Bourdieu's reproduction theory have contributed importantly on the relation between social class and education, especially revealing privileges of middle class people and discrimination on working-class members in educational institutions and processes (Ball et al. 2002, Reay et al. 2010). Tying into this stream of literature, the thesis resulting from empirical research shall be argued that education, which gives leeway and sources to seek truth, enables upward social mobility. Students who have experienced a large degree of precariousness are able to find assurance through studying in universities and therefore leave their original milieus. This study which enables a process of assurance, is somewhat similar to the old-fashioned way of studying before the Bologna Reform, in which students were given a lot of time and leeway to select their courses, to follow their interests and above all, to raise existential questions and seek answers.[2]   This truth-seeking way of studying enables assurance because there is a connection between truth (seeking) and security which will be outlined below. However, this paper will not argue for a re-organization of universities to former times, but suggests aspects of a new university.

The paper starts with a clarification on key concepts such as ontological assurance, precariousness and truth. Then, three life histories of educationally upwardly mobile former working-class people who gained assurance through studying at universities will be outlined. It will be demonstrated how in these three cases, studying worked as a process of ontological assurance. It follows an explanation of the connection between truth (seeking) and ontological assurance. Finally, conclusions for the organization of teaching and learning in higher education will be drawn.

1.1   What do ontological assurance, precariousness and truth mean?

To clarify my use of concepts I start with demarcations: I am not using "ontological" following Aristotle's philosophy of logical and conceptual reflections on being. I also do not follow Giddens (1991) who relates "ontological security" very much to "the tacit character of practical consciousness" (36), necessary to continue everyday activities. Instead, I use "ontological" to relate to issues concerning the own existence, the own life, the own being. With "assurance" I refer to a mainly mental process of gaining the feeling of being safe and secure in the world. In a way, this is a process of becoming an adult, of growing up and gaining a sense of one's self as an autonomous being in relation to others and to the world. It could also be seen as a state of mental health. But in contrast to some psychological concepts, assurance is not restricted to the individual, but always relates to social contexts from which it depends. With "precariousness" I refer to both: unstable material and social conditions. Of course, what is considered to be stable, varies between social contexts. In relation to the two societies from which the life histories of working-class people of precarious backgrounds were taken, Austria

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1 See (Kupfer 2015).

2 It would be interesting to research how far this kind of traditional organization and content of studying contributed to the reproduction of the former elites but this is not part of this paper.

and England (see Kupfer 2015), stability in a material sense includes the constant incomes of parents to satisfy basic needs such as shelter, food etc. Experiences of precariousness in a material way means that people grew up in families lacking income, at least from time to time, or with insufficient income to cover basic needs. Precariousness, in a social way, refers to the absence of relations to parents and other family members or persons providing constant emotional care. This can be caused by the physical absence of parents or other caretakers, or by unreliable emotional relations caused by mentally unstable parents, or even by abusive or violent parents. All these forms of social precariousness impede the development of a sense of ontological assurance. An important aspect of precariousness is the constant insecurity, which goes along with a constant existential fear. This is true for both the material and social aspects of living conditions. Not knowing what comes next, or what the next day and future looks like raises anxiety. In such an environment, security becomes one of the most important basic needs to be satisfied. Security, in this context, means the constant satisfaction of material and basic social needs.

Finally, with "truth", I refer to knowledge and realizations that are seen as temporary approaches. I presume that there are different degrees of knowledge and realizations differentiated by the quality of ways it is gained. So, for example, I would consider a knowledge, or temporary truth that has been gained through systematic and traceable methods as superior to a knowledge that is claimed without being comprehensible. But my understanding of truth does not prescribe a certain content of what is being considered as truth and it is non-essentialist in the way that truth is always seen as something dynamic, not fixed. This concept of truth is inclusive as it allows different people to approach knowledge and realizations differently and to obtain different truths.

Equipped with a clarification of key notions, I will now turn to three life histories of working-class people from precarious backgrounds who achieved ontological assurance through seeking truth while studying in universities.

1.2 Life histories of seeking truth through studying leading to upward social mobility

The following life histories form part of the larger study with an overall sample of 18 biographical narrative interviews collected in Austria and Britain from 2009 to 2012. A snowball sample of interviewees born between 1928 and 1978 were recruited in both countries and through an announcement in an alumni journal of a second-chance educational institution for adults additional interviewees were recruited in Austria. The sample is by no way representative but covers a large range of generations, as well as graduates coming from several milieus, having studied different subjects at a variety of universities. All life history narrations were reconstructed following the method of Rosenthal (1993, 2004, 2008).[3] The central reasoning for reconstructing life histories is to reveal the 'rule' of materialization of the life history, the structures that created them. So, a reconstruction of a life history goes beyond a mere description of it. The following summary offers an insight into the life histories of students and examines the 'rule' or logic of their student journeys.   The study results in a search for truth to seek ontological assurance resulting in upward social mobility. Peter Mutz[4] was born in 1960 in Austria. His mother left school after compulsory education and worked as a maid, an agricultural worker, and in her husband's grocery. His father was a vocationally educated retail salesman. Mutz was the youngest of four children. He grew up in a rural area where his parents owned and ran a grocery shop. At the age of six, when Mutz started school,

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3 In Britain, Chamberlayne and Wengraf participated in workshops with Rosenthal and made her method known (Chamberlayne *et al*., 2002; Wengraf 1999, 2001).

4 All names are invented.

his father committed suicide, leaving his widow with a large amount of debts. His mother was overstrained with running the grocery, educating four children and working the small piece of land. Mutz and his siblings got into a bad state. After four years of local elementary school, Mutz started in a catholic boarding school which offered the highest school leaving certificate 'Matura', a pre-requisite to enter university. At the boarding school, Mutz experienced violence from the priests and stopped co-operating when he was 13 years old. He left the boarding school and returned home to attend Hauptschule, a compulsory school offering the lowest school leaving certificate, usually leading to apprenticeships. After having finished Hauptschule, Mutz attended an upper secondary vocational school that offered both a vocational education in hotel management and 'Matura'. This school was situated further away from his home and operated as a boarding school, with many rural pupils boarding during term and returning home during the holidays: Mutz followed this pattern. During his teenage years, Mutz developed a strong emotional relationship with one of his uncles who was an active social democrat and who became a mentor for Mutz. After completing this upper secondary vocational school successfully, Mutz completed military service and then worked for three years in a travel agency. In his spare time, he engaged in a local youth club where he met university students. Mutz started studying sociology, but he did not complete his studies as he found it boring and switched to economics. He received a full study grant and moved to the city where he got a place in student accommodation with help from his uncle. Mutz enjoyed studying. He talked enthusiastically about his lectures and professors:

> *"Economics was interesting because I liked maths and logical things. Let's say that model stuff, I like very much, right? And those graphs and formulas made me very happy".*

From higher education, he seeks realization, knowledge, and logic – the calculable. Being able to calculate something means being able to preview, to know what will happen, to be in power to find out. Mutz spent seven years studying, of which the two last years were part-time due to the end of his study grant and the necessity to work and earn money. For his Master's thesis, he was awarded a prestigious prize. Mutz was employed in social work. He explains his practical employment with his need to be able to do things on his own, not to rely on someone due to: *"this helplessness that I felt perhaps in my childhood, right? That one needs to be able to do things"*. In Mutz's search for truth, logic enables him to gain assurance. He graduated from university and moved socially upwards, enabling him to take up an executive position in social work. Still, his ontological assurance through intellectual work and study needed to be complemented by practically oriented employment. Of course, other factors were also essential for his upward social mobility such as a full study grant. Nevertheless, the motivation that led him towards and through university was the possibility to follow his interests, to satisfy his needs in acquiring knowledge and insights.

Oliver Berry was also born in 1960, in a small town north of London. His mother was about 21 years old and had no further education apart from her compulsory education. Berry's father had a similar educational background. Berry had a sister, three years older than him. Berry's father worked for his own father, who owned land. He delivered vegetables around London. At the age of two and a half years, his father left the family, without prior announcement. His mother suffered a nervous breakdown and in order to avoid the children going into an orphanage, Berry's grandparents (his father's parents) took care of him and his sister. At their grandparents' place, they grew up in protected conditions for five years. Then, Berry's father returned with another woman who had two daughters and they moved in together. During this time, his mother suffered a recurrence of mental illness, then re-married and had two more children. Berry and his sister were allowed to visit her every second Sunday until the violence of her second husband became too much. Berry's mother separated from her second husband, moved to a houseboat which her divorced husband set on fire, for which crime he was sentenced to prison. In elementary school, only Berry and one other pupil passed regular intelligence tests as well as the 11+ exam which qualified him for grammar school. He enjoyed

grammar school. When he was 12 years old, his father and stepmother moved to run a pub in an area, where there was no grammar school so he attended a county middle school in which he felt bored and switched off. He worked regularly in the pub where a lot of violence occurred. This violence was also seen at home. At the age of 16, Berry left his family and school and worked as a cook in catering. When he is 22, his mother got in touch with him and they met once. He spent his spare time with students from the local student union who encouraged him to catch up with his 'A' levels in order to study at university, which he did. He studied history, contemporary art and social anthropology for a BA and received a full study grant. After having finished his degree, he worked for four years as a caretaker. Being 41 years old, he started a part-time Master's in health policy funded with a grant to cover tuition fees. In his Master's thesis, he analysed texts on health policies in a comparative perspective. His epistemological interest centred on analysing texts. Berry explained his Master's thesis:

> *"I – throughout this whole kind of period of those kind of emotional traumas, at two-and-a-half, I didn't used to speak very often. Words just – er, well, what are words? Which like [incomprehensible] throughout a life of them, you are doing a Master's [incomprehensible] epistemologically, epistemological power of the word, and just kind of go 'I know exactly what you mean', you know? Because the word, I rarely [pause], you know, it's one thing I do remember, is my lack of speech".*

For Berry, studying enabled him to seek and find words that enabled a clear description and analysis. With this, he overcame his speechlessness having started with traumatic experiences in his childhood. Seeking realizations through studying language enabled Berry to achieve assurance.

Karin Eichner was born in 1972 in Austria. Her mother came from a very poor and patriarchal family in Transylvania and finished her education with compulsory school. She worked as a cleaner and later as a packer. Eichner's father was the youngest of 13 children of a family from the countryside. He also left school after his compulsory education and worked as a taxi driver. Eichner's father was an alcohol addict and violent. He regularly beat Eichner and her elder sister. Eichner never knew when her father would come home, how drunk or aggressive or sad he might be, or whether he would come at all. She tried to stay away from home as much as possible and was allowed to play outside with the kids of the neighbourhood. Eichner loved elementary school. After long summer holidays, she was happy when school started again. She performed excellently, which was recognized by her father, whereas her mother did not comment on it at all. When she was about 11 years old, she discovered the local library and started reading a lot. Despite teachers' recommendations and private conversations with her parents, she was sent to the Hauptschule instead of Gymnasium. She was bored. Her boredom continued at the upper vocational school, a commercial academy she started after she finished Hauptschule. When Eichner was 15 years old, her father had a car accident and died. Her mother was in financial trouble and decided that her daughter had to leave upper vocational school in order to start a paid apprenticeship. Eichner became an office clerk. Having finished, she studied on her own to pass university entrance exams to study sociology. Eichner described the first lecture as a 'light-bulb' moment. Time was running fast and she was finally not bored:

> *"I was sitting there, and my mouth was hanging open, and after an hour, I thought, wow, now time has passed so quickly, something I hadn't experienced in the other subjects, and I – yes, it just interested me completely. It was exciting. I thought: I can study this, yes, this is about people, about society, a bit about history and that's it, yes".*

Eichner equated her years of study as the best time in her life:

> *"I felt great. That was a very, very good time. That was the time when an incredible amount happened in my private life, when I began to leave my childhood story behind. I mean, this, of course, you can't completely, but then it was not as present, and it did not determine my*

life so much, and I dealt with it a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, and yes. And I felt increasingly better, so I could sense myself my own life, and – good".

After her studies, Eichner worked in a research project and later in a further education organization, followed by jobs in companies and finally in the education department of a large state run organization.

In all three life histories, higher education is a place where abandoned, deeply shaken, violated, and neglected people from precarious working-class backgrounds found ways to gain assurance through acquiring logics, language and knowledge on societies. It becomes obvious that truth seeking is not limited to privileged people of upper classes. What might appear at first sight an activity only open to privileged people not having to worry about daily income, is in fact a dimension of education that everybody, and especially people from working-class backgrounds should be offered too. Obviously, there is a great variety on working-class needs and interests and motivations to study at universities and not all are coming from precarious backgrounds and some might have very practical demands and perceive their study more like a way towards employment as Lehmann (2008) in Canada explored. Nevertheless, it seems important to offer working-class people highly academic programmes, aiming at exigent intellectual work and not restricting them to less demanding programs. Seeking truth forms an important dimension of education. This is crucial for the ways teaching and learning is organized in higher education as I will outline later. It is also important to consider the connections between seeking truth and assurance. At first sight, it might seem that searching for truth more likely leads to doubts and insecurity. Even more so as there is no single truth to be obtained. But the following explanation will show that this is not necessarily the case.

1.3   Connections between seeking truth and ontological assurance

In precarious situations, security is the foremost and most important need. In cases where security cannot be reached, comfort can be helpful. There are five ways that truth can lead to security and comfort. I will start with the most pressing.[5]

First, 'security' can be defined as orientation, order, firmness, reliability, a foundation (see Young 2007 on 'powerful knowledge'). These qualities are often in sharp contrast to the chaos at home: unreliable parents, absent or neglectful parents, abusive parents. Eichner's upward educational mobility is a good example for this way of truth-seeking leading to security. As a child, she acquired additional knowledge apart from school by reading books in the local library. At university, she developed a deep interest in a wide range of areas such as people, society and history and got excited about what she learned. This excitement was closely related to an intellectual pleasure and satisfaction which was also experienced by Mutz and Berry.

Second, seeking truth does not mean necessarily achieving truth; no clear or fixed answers are possible. Still, the process itself can create security in going deeper, discarding superficial assumptions and knowing how to detect unsatisfactory answers. Security consists in achieving a comprehensive knowledge that builds a foundation for apt questions. For Eichner, time passed quickly in university lectures in contrast to the boring vocational education she had gone through before. Mutz loved to "play" with models and Berry enjoyed grammar school whereas he switched off at a county middle school thereafter. All three of them are driven by a motivation to go deeper, to go beyond easy and first sight 'half-knowledge'.

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5   The following five points are listed in my book on educational upward mobility as well (see Kupfer 2015).

Third, intellectual activity, deliberation and saturation in ideas that cannot be realized otherwise, spiritually, corporally, emotionally, may not achieve the security of truth, but are a secure methodology or a methodology of securing. Here, cognitive understanding, memorizing and writing can help to capture something, to keep it in mind and to prevent it from dissolving and disappearing. For Mutz, he applied the logics and mathematical modelling to empower himself to reach results. This methodology provided him with security since it helped him to withstand surprises and the arbitrariness of unforeseen events, such as the suicide of his father.

Fourth, seeking truth can also provide comfort. Here, understanding means grasping something; it is accessible, not detached. One is not alone, not separated from it but holds it in his or her mind and this connection can be comforting. For Berry, studying epistemologies and analysing texts for his Master's thesis, was a way to access language from which he was cut off due to his trauma experienced as a small child. While studying, he gained and developed his speech. With this, he learned to express himself and to relate to the world in a practical way. A long period of isolation ended and he built relationships at work and in his private life providing him with a sense of belonging.

Fifth, seeking truth and reaching an understanding of something sad, such as precarious childhood experiences, can provide meaning, not in the sense of a destination or fate, but in tracing something that still exists. One cannot change the past, but one may learn that it was not one's fault; one did not miss an opportunity to remove it from the world or to change it for the better. The knowledge that one could not have done anything is calming, comforting, and provides peace. This knowledge-based peace could be found in all three narratives of reflected and secure adults having gone through emotional and material precariousness. Mutz could mourn his father's suicide without feeling guilty, Berry and Eichner could accept their parents' neglect as something that damaged their lives without determining it. Contradictory emotions such as rage and longing may exist while they are able to live their lives encompassing and going beyond their traumatic experiences.

When considered from a religious framework, truth could be interpreted as an attitude rather than a fixed set of assertions. Developing an attitude and seeking truth are activities that could be learned.[6] To acquire these activities, educational institutions are crucial. These need to be organized in a way that enables and does not impede the journey of truth-seeking. In the following section, dimensions of the organization of higher education enabling this purpose will be outlined.

1.4 Organization of teaching and learning in higher education providing leeway for truth seeking

Seeking truth might appear to be a highly individual process and therefore the question arises whether it can be organized within an institution like the university. It is indeed challenging to enable processes of individual growth within one framework, as educators experience it daily. Nevertheless, educational institutions are also intentionally created for the purpose of self-development contributing to society. The following suggestions take this challenge into account to consider both: an overall framework enabling individual development. The organization of teaching and learning needs to be done on a societal level in order to offer the possibility of ontological assurance to everybody. Otherwise, searching for truth is exclusively for upper classes obtaining enough money and time for it.

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6   In the Christian religious text, *the Gospel according to John*, Jesus assures his followers (disciples) of help from God in the 'spirit of truth' which could be interpreted as an attitude rather than a fixed set of assertions.

First of all, higher education should offer a choice of study content, as well as a choice of courses. Study programmes should consist of a wide range of options. Curricula that are tied up with compulsory schedules should be changed into one's offering a leeway for following one's own interests as a student. Of course, there may be sequential courses necessary too in order to build up systematic knowledge. Nevertheless, study programs should always offer choice on content. Mutz' journey of educational upward mobility offered an insight into the importance of being able to focus on a core study area within the selected discipline (after having explored that his previous study subject choice was wrong for him). Mutz' search for truth and assurance took place in relation to one specific methodological way, modelling, one among various in his subject. The study programme of his university in his time provided him with such a leeway, which current students might miss due to shortened and tightened curricula of the Bachelor and Master's programmes that replaced the former diploma and magister degrees due to the Bologna study reforms. However, to prevent students from being swamped in multiple offers or to drop out in high numbers as this was the case before Bologna reforms, guidance to navigate through higher education should be accessible and offered in various shapes according to individuals' needs. Mentoring programs and institutionalized course guidance are necessary and should be available to all students. In addition, Berry's topic selection of his Master's thesis demonstrates how crucial it might be not to prescribe topics and therefore resist pressures in terms of time restrictions as well as the pressures placed on academic staff for increased research output. Universities should also encourage and provide resources for students creating their own courses. Students are young adults with an abundance of experiences and some of them are eager to search for answers to questions they have. In already prepared courses, lecturers and professors should offer space for contributions from students to an extent that additional topics, literature etc. are included that connect the material offered to students' interests.

In addition to a variety of study content, the composition of the teaching and student body should be more heterogeneous to be inclusive. Despite the expansion of higher education, most university academic staff and students are still from middle or upper classes and very few are from migratory backgrounds. Additionally, in most subjects, female professors are still under-represented. Consequently, the universities' milieus are rather class- and ethnicity-specific as well as male-dominated. The research project on which Eichner was hired after having completed her degree, was run by a professor of working class background himself. It was not by accident that she was seen and promoted by this professor. Recruitment practices for staff and student admission policies should orient towards increasing heterogeneity. However, heterogeneity should not aim at building up group-specific knowledge, but with an increase in heterogeneity, the class, ethnicity, etc. specific design of study programs, course contents, selection criteria as well as creation, teaching and learning of knowledge could diminish in favour of focusing the object of research and teaching – not neglecting that knowledge has a subjective facet as well.

A third dimension of the organization of higher education oriented towards enabling truth-seeking consists in power relations among university members. In order to encourage participation which is a pre-requisite for following one's own interests, hierarchies need to be diminished. According to the Habermasian ideal of communication without hierarchies, the fewer hierarchies created and practiced, the fewer impediments to seeking truth are created. Thus, the less professors and lecturers are interested in their positions, and the more they are interested in conveying their subject content, the more likely it is that social, economic, and cultural 'strangers' will pose a question and participate in a mutually enriching discussion. At low hierarchized locations for the pursuit of truth, participants know they will not be ridiculed or diminished; that others will behave in a trustworthy, respectful way; and that space will be provided for calming down, concentrating and coming to oneself.

Finally, funding should be public and cover costs to enable studying and researching. As demonstrated, all three presented educational upward mobile life histories would not have been possible without public study funds for low-income people. For academic staff, private funding and a shortage of resources may lead to influences in higher education diverging from content orientation towards other issues like competition. This in turn builds up an apparatus of benchmarks and evaluations that impede seeking truth.

It might seem counter-intuitive to argue out of an egalitarian and inclusive perspective for a kind of higher education that resembles traditional universities which were highly exclusive. But a closer look at my argument brought to light that the suggested organizational changes would lead indeed to a new university, one in which working-class students with precarious backgrounds would be able to overcome their past. In times when social inequality increases, organizational changes for an inclusive higher education system are crucial for working class people.

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