From Schoolyards to Factory Floors

Roxana Willis

From Schoolyards to Factory Floors

Roxana Willis*

Abstract: This is the first empirical chapter in *A Precarious Life* (OUP 2023)—a long-term 'ethnography at home', providing an internal view of crime and conflict among one of the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in Britain. Instead of explaining violence by theorising from the 'top down' (a tendency of mainstream accounts), *A Precarious Life* offers an alternative perspective 'from below'. Criminal law scholarship often begins with the presupposition that individuals are autonomous. However, philosophers and legal scholars have compellingly shown that the autonomous individual does not exist in a metaphorical state of nature; instead, autonomy is a moral ideal in liberal societies, which certain people can attain if the socio-economic conditions are conducive for them to do so. This chapter argues that structural inequality in Britain prohibits the least advantaged from becoming autonomous. Ethnographic analysis—including working-class biography and ethnographic portraiture—shines a light on how precariously situated participants must navigate a challenging trajectory from punitive schooling into precarious forms of deregulated and insecure work. Rather than regarding structural conditions in England as apt for all to attain autonomy, this chapter indicates that the autonomous individual would struggle to flourish in such coercive conditions, where workers describe themselves as 'scared to fart without a good excuse'. Importantly, if class inequality in Britain thwarts the possibility of universal autonomy, then the presupposition of the autonomous individual in criminal law requires imminent revision.

Keywords: working class, biography, criminal law theory, education inequality, deindustrialisation, labour insecurity, precarity, autonomy

* Assistant Professor, Law School, London School of Economics and Political Science.

We can understand the autonomous individual as a moral ideal in advanced liberal societies. Following Enlightenment developments, ideas about rational agency and beliefs in the disengaged subject as distinct from the collective body grew in force in European political thought. Influential philosophers, including Grotius, Locke, and Hobbes, had taken as their primary unit of analysis the disengaged subject— i.e., an individual disconnected from other human beings and background normative frameworks. A presupposed vision of the social world often complemented this picture of the individual: society could form, in principle, from a set of lone individuals agreeing to cooperate. Social contract theories often assume that the disengaged subject would sacrifice a degree of personal autonomy by entering into social agreements to enhance security and develop collective enterprises. This view implies that individuals enter society already oriented to a certain moral view of the world and in possession of personal property (or some proto-property), which must be respected by the collective body if individuals are to cooperate. In these theories, individuals are deemed to be rational actors, self-interested by nature.

Notwithstanding the historical significance of these philosophical arguments, or the social gains facilitated by conceptualising the individual as disengaged, in the last fifty or so years, much philosophy has interrogated the underlying metaphysics—in turn, liberal theory itself has made significant revisions. At the ontological level, political philosophers have compellingly shown the implausibility of the disengaged subject as capable of existing in principle prior to society, since the language, dispositions, values, and ways of being which very much (as the argument goes) constitute us are essentially communal too (MacIntyre, 1981; Sandel, 1982; Walzer, 1983; Taylor, 1985a; Jaggar, 1985; Lacey, 1988). In response to these penetrating critiques, the revised liberal position generally no longer commits itself to an atomised metaphysical view of the individual. Instead, contemporary liberal theory tends to pitch itself at the normative level—i.e. concerned not simply with 'what is' but with 'what ought to be'—being more self-aware as theory which pushes a particular conception of the good life, albeit one that prioritises individual autonomy (Raz, 1986; Nussbaum, 2009; Mills, 2014; Friedman, 1989).

In recognition of the ontological missteps of earlier liberal theories, then, some contemporary scholars have accepted normative positions about the value of nurturing individual liberty; although it is accepted that human beings are not fully autonomous subjects by their nature, some legal thinkers of the liberal tradition argue that autonomy should nevertheless be pursued as a moral good. Joseph Raz (1986) is a proponent of this position, advancing a normative jurisprudential thesis for an autonomy-oriented conception of individual freedom. Raz outlines the moral ideal of autonomy:

> The ruling idea behind the ideal of personal autonomy is that people should make their own lives. The autonomous person is a (part) author of his own life. The ideal of personal autonomy is the vision of people controlling, to some degree, their own destiny, fashioning it through successive decisions throughout their lives (Raz, 1986: 369).

Raz appreciates that individual autonomy is not a given; that, therefore, we must actively realise conditions for autonomy; and that social conditions can be more or less ripe for an individual to make choices. Raz suggests three conditions for autonomy (1986: 327): (1) the development of mental abilities, so that individuals have an awareness of available options and can appreciate their meaning; (2) the need for an adequate range of options, which requires that a variety of qualitative goods are available; and (3) the independence for individuals to make their choices. Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000) offer further takes on the types of capabilities that ought to be nurtured to realise individual liberty.

Such liberal theories acknowledge that to secure conditions for autonomy, we must engage in an active process, and cannot simply treat autonomy as a natural feature of the human condition. In a similar way, Charles Taylor (1985b) advises that, if autonomy is a fundamental good in liberal societies, then the conditions which make autonomy possible must not be taken for granted but nurtured and maintained. Likewise, Nicola Lacey (1988: 176–81) encourages us to acknowledge how our ability to exercise autonomy depends to some degree on background social factors, and that, having recognised the social nature of the self, our conception of autonomy must connect (rather than conflict) with the social good. These more recent works—from both the liberal and so-called communitarian tradition—recognise explicitly that autonomy is a normative ideal; they stress that societies which value autonomy must structure themselves to make possible the realization of this ideal.

The foundational philosophical debate about the nature of the self, and the bearings it has on the need for structural conditions to conduce to the autonomous ideal, had occurred during a period of political change which runs counter to these insights (and continues to do so). From the late 1970s onwards, popular political discourse in the UK, the US, and elsewhere has undergone what some call a 'penal turn': a hyper-emphasis on the individual, limited state intervention for welfare provisions, and unprecedented state involvement in the punishment of individuals deemed responsible for norm violations in various social spheres, including criminal justice, school, work, welfare, and immigration (critical accounts include Aliverti, 2012; Brown, 2019; Ericson, 2007; Garland, 1985; Harvey, 2007; Simon, 2007; I. Tyler, 2015; Wacquant, 2009; Zedner, 2010). Instead of recognising that to attain the moral ideal of the autonomous individual we first require conditions conducive to developing autonomy, recent crime policy takes the fully formed autonomous individual largely as a given; it is this which provides a justificatory basis for punishing those who fail to act in accordance with certain standards. Consequently, irrespective of structural barriers preventing socio-economically disadvantaged

persons from attaining an autonomous status, those unable to live up to the dominant social norms are held to be responsible for their failings.

In tandem with the political discourse, contemporary criminal law theory in Britain for the most part also takes the autonomous individual as the starting point for legal analysis, as Barbara Hudson (1994: 302) aptly captures:

> That individuals have choices is a basic legal assumption: that circumstances constrain choices is not. Legal reasoning seems unable to appreciate that the existential view of the world as an arena for acting out free choices is a perspective of the privileged, and that potential for self-actualization is far from apparent to those whose lives are constricted by material or ideological handicaps.

In accordance with mainstream legal scholarship, the notion of subjective fault is pursued as a principal ideal of the English and Welsh criminal law, according to which a defendant's state of mind has become increasingly important to determining culpability and corresponding punishment (Ashworth, 1989; Ashworth and Zedner, 2014; Duff, 2007; Gardner, 2003). On this view, the more a defendant wills a criminal act, the more responsible they ought to be held for the consequences that occur. While there is a degree of recognition by mainstream criminal law theorists that socio-economic inequality is relevant to legal inquiry—if certain persons are denied the means to develop into autonomous selves, then it is arguably unfair to treat those persons as fully responsible in the eyes of the law (see Ashworth and Horder, 2013)—for the most part, these questions are side-lined, regarded as outside the scope of mainstream legal scholarship.

If society is structured so that only persons of certain categories can acquire an autonomous status, then liberal criminal law doctrine advanced by mainstream theory is best seen as aspirational for justice, at which society might aim but is yet to achieve. Without the caveat that personal autonomy itself is aspirational, we may fail to nurture conditions required for the autonomous ideal, in the process holding those denied the opportunity to acquire this status, unfairly, to out-of-reach standards of behaviour. In this respect, I follow Marina Oshana (2014, 2016) in her development of a substantive socio-relational concept of autonomy, which recognises that a person lacks autonomy in oppressive and coercive conditions. Importantly, however, as Oshana (2014: 6–7) notes, to say a person is denied the conditions to attain autonomy is not to deny that the person ought to be entitled to autonomy. Instead, Oshana's account pushes us to assess what is presently lacking in the lives of those without autonomy, and to actively redress this lack. Indeed, without due recognition of the social reality of coercive conditions, liberal theory is left resting on an unstable foundation that undermines principles of justice.

In the Introduction, I sketched out the notion of what I am calling the framework of autonomy, within which people live and by which they orient themselves, especially in their moral deliberations. In later chapters, we will see just what such normative activity amounts to. However, featuring within this framework

is the moral ideal of autonomy itself. In this chapter, I examine that moral ideal in advanced liberal society, assessing the degree to which it is feasible for persons born into socio-economically disadvantaged positions in England to attain it.

I begin this task by reflecting on a common trajectory that those born into disadvantaged class positions in Britain follow, from school into insecure forms of employment. A rich body of work has developed which plausibly explains why disadvantaged children have consistently entered the most precarious forms of labour, by bringing to the fore a range of structural limitations that disadvantaged children confront in the present day (Ball, 2003; Evans, 2006, 2006; Lareau, 2011; Lawler, 2005; Reay, 1998; Reay et al., 2007; Rollock et al., 2014; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Willis, 1977). The studies I draw on incorporate theoretical concepts influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, illuminating the complex ways in which the development of the autonomous self is stifled for socio-economically disadvantaged persons in a classed society. Beginning with childhood helps us trace limits on the attainment of autonomy, since infancy is one of the few recognised exceptions to criminal liability (see Loughnan, 2012). The period of youth provides us with a point in time when a person moves from a social status of dependency to autonomy for the purposes of criminal capacity (drawn sharply at the age of ten in England and Wales).

I adopt an ethnographic portrait method to illustrate how the theory plays out at the level of practice, which involves sharing aspects of my father's biography, interwoven with the experiences of his peers across the generations. By examining society as a lived phenomenon, we may bring into view some of the structural barriers that prevent the emergence of the autonomous ideal. Countering the tendency of popular discourse to overemphasise exceptional cases—the stories of those born into class disadvantage who defy the odds and achieve a degree of social mobility—I focus on how my father moved from school into precarious work, which demonstrates the norm in a socially immobile Britain. My father's life presents us with a challenge to make sense of: he was born into the most disadvantaged of circumstances and presented the most remarkable of talents, yet instead of society's being structured in such a way that his talents were nurtured, formal state institutions had a disabling effect. Hence, the liberal ideal of equal opportunity did not manifest. Crucially, we will see how these barriers are not faced by lone individuals but are in fact the shared reality of class disadvantage.

The first part of the chapter examines how my father, Paul, and other participants in his community experienced education. After exploring some of the challenges in the social sphere of school, we look at the conditions of precarious work which early school-leavers are likely to enter. Here we examine precarious wage labour in Britain to find that, instead of helping to flourish the moral ideal of the autonomous individual, such labour subjects workers to intrusive methods of employer surveillance and coercive control, and curtails their individual choice and self-governance—so much so, that individuals who attain autonomy are unlikely to flourish in such workspaces. By the end of the chapter, we will have a feel for the difficulties that community participants face when they encounter formal state

systems, which sets the scene for an alternative form of life I explain further in the following chapters.

SCHOOLING THE PRECARIAT

Like many Corby residents, Paul's family migrated to the town for employment in the late 1940s. Paul's family had an industrial background. On the paternal side, Paul's grandfather was a cobbler, and his father worked in the tarmac and steel industries until ill health forced him into periods of unemployment. On the maternal side, Paul's mother left school at fourteen to work in a clothing factory, and her close ancestors had worked as servants at Althorp Palace, as chimney cleaners, foundry workers, and caregivers, among other vocations. Both sides of the family were actively involved in the national war efforts: Paul's mother worked in the Land Army during the Second World War; his father was in the Royal Air Forces; and his maternal grandfather returned from the First World War with suspected 'shellshock', which in turn haunted the childhood of Paul's mother.

Paul was born in 1947, and his sister, Carol, two years later. Paul did not talk much about his childhood. He had good memories of working in the allotment with his grandfather, shared stories about well-executed pranks in school, and when he reminisced about the single school trip he went on to London, it made him smile. Carol struggled to think of a happy memory from their shared childhood. Carol remembers being embarrassed of her dirty uniform, the pain of a frozen house in winter, ice forming on the insides of the windows, and sleeping under coats. Occasionally, Carol remembers, she and Paul would sneak downstairs in the middle of the night to turn the oven on with the door open for a moment of warmth. Carol recalls Christmas as particularly bleak; however, one year, their Aunt Nelly brought them each a book, the boys' and girls' handbook. Carol and Paul cherished the books, and each night they tested each other on the names of capital cities, national flags, and other facts that the handbooks revealed. Paul never got an answer wrong—he had a phenomenal memory.

Despite the absence of academic pursuits in the family, Paul managed to secure a place at the Grammar School in Corby, joined a couple of years later by his younger sister. One of Paul's fondest memories was being taught Latin by Colin Dexter, who later went on to write the popular British detective series Inspector Morse. Notwithstanding his love of chemistry, Paul described himself as years behind other children by the time he entered school, a starting point from which he struggled to catch up. Apart from the sciences, Paul received mostly low grades and school reports paint a picture of a mischievous child. Paul recalls his best performances were in examinations that other students had difficultly preparing for; it was in these moments Paul was able to excel beyond his more privileged peers. Even though Paul stood out for his intellectual abilities—an IQ in the top few

percentiles, a photographic memory, and notable problem-solving capabilities[1]—Paul did not excel, mirroring the qualities of many highly able children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds who entered the grammar school system in the late 1950s (cf. Reay, 2017; Todd, 2014: ch 10).

For much of my life, I have tried to make sense of the discrepancy between my father's evident intellectual abilities and his low achievements in school, which seemed to be something of an enigma. The liberal values that cloak the English education system would have us believe that if someone is intelligent and tries hard, then they have sufficient opportunity to do well in school, and if someone lacks intelligence or fails to apply themselves then they do less well in school, and in this way casts school outcomes and the social distribution of privileges that result as in some sense fair. But this fiction could never account for my father, and indeed others I grew up with, who were highly capable thinkers and extremely hardworking, and yet did not attain the markers of scholastic success. The further I progressed in higher education, the more apparent the discrepancy between qualifications and intellectual ability became.

In some ways, Paul's lack of social mobility is consonant with the historical role of education in English society. Schooling in England, as in other places in Europe, has always functioned on a tiered basis, where those lower down in the social order are channelled into disadvantaged forms of schooling, which primarily ensures civil obedience rather than equal learning opportunities (Müller et al., 1989; Gorard and Siddiqui, 2018). When compulsory education was introduced in England in the late-nineteenth century, it was overtly classed, implemented to instil middle-class values and sensibilities in the disadvantaged, while maintaining social distance between working-class children and the rest (cf. Davidoff and Hall, 2013; Hopkins, 1994; Tomlinson, 2019). Like other modern state institutions, the hope was that education could shape socio-economically disadvantaged persons into respectable individuals who embodied a Puritan work ethic and a self-controlled way of being in the world (Finn et al., 1978; Skeggs, 1997). Hence, early educational provisions for the English poor did not serve as apparatuses for individual flourishing but as an institutional means of nurturing within the underprivileged an acceptance of their place in the civil order—a place lower than the middle classes, but above the racialised subjects at home and in the colonies abroad (Heathorn, 2000; Virdee, 2014). Although English schooling no longer has the explicit aim of instilling in children an acceptance of their position at birth, given its having been structured in that manner and the absence of significant structural change, the schooling system continues to produce largely the same effect.

Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1998) offers us a way to develop a thicker description of contemporary educational inequalities. Instead of reading school achievement from its surface appearance, as a form of fair competition in which the most academically

---

[1] For an important discussion on the largely socialised aspect of intelligence and the IQ test, in particular, see Stephen Gould (1996). On the significance of nurture over nature, see also Dalton Conley et al. (2015), and Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson (2019: ch 3).

bright simply do better in examinations, Bourdieu recognises a whole host of concealed social resources that individuals acquire in the course of their lifetimes, enhancing their performance in school and other social arenas. Bourdieu (1986) explains resources in terms of capital: economic capital (e.g. our financial and material assets), social capital (e.g. the networks we can rely on for assistance), and cultural capital (e.g. what we come to know and like). Whereas some social resources benefitting individuals are more obvious, such as economic resources, cultural capital can be less apparent, for it can become embodied by the capital holder. When an individual embodies cultural capital, Bourdieu suggests that it forms part of their 'habitus', and hence it affects their dispositions and learned ways of being in the world—it becomes a feature of who they are. The more well suited a child's capital and habitus are to a given activity or arena, the more likely they will flourish in that social space.

Sociologists have effectively applied Bourdieu's work to explain the persistence of class-based inequality in school. For instance, observations of middle-class parenting in Britain and the US show how parents strategically direct their social resources to access more advantageous forms of schooling and adopt styles of parenting that enhance their children's skills and abilities, in turn helping children to excel in school (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2007; Reay, 1998; Rollock et al., 2014). Annette Lareau (2011: 16) terms this middle-class style of parenting 'concerted cultivation', which develops a 'sense of entitlement' in children that advantages them in the educational field. In contrast, Lareau shows that socio-economically disadvantaged parents have fewer social resources on which to draw, and so must apply the limited resources that they do have on daily subsistence and survival. Accordingly, Lareau (2011: 16) describes this parenting style as facilitating 'the accomplishment of natural growth', which nurtures in children the skills needed for survival in precarious conditions, rather than the skills that facilitate success in school.

As Beverly Skeggs (1997) and Gillian Evans (2006) note, due to stark environmental differences, socio-economically disadvantaged pupils tend to be drawn to more practical styles of learning which have real-world application, rather than abstract and detached forms of thought that are nurtured in school and are used to determine scholastic success and the distribution of resources. Unlike their advantaged peers, disadvantaged children must learn about necessity, which in turn further handicaps them in the competitive struggle for scholastic achievement. Crucially, this body of work provides an explanation for the collective experience of educational failure among the least advantaged in the social order.

THE COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE FOR SCHOLASTIC SUCCESS

A structural account, which moves beyond the individual level of explanation, equips us with a means to make intelligible the shared reality of school failure among

Paul's multigenerational peers. Young people in the community, who were pupils at the time of my fieldwork, also encounter school as a site of disappointment, several decades after Paul attended school. Many adolescent youths whom I spent time with on the estate had been subjected to periods of exclusion from school, both temporary and permanent, or spent time in 'isolation' for bad behaviour—a punitive measure that requires a student to work alone in a supervised room. Even after leaving school, painful memories endured for some, such as for a teenage boy in Paul's community who commented that 'even though I don't go school any more the staff still piss me off'. Conversely, other young adults regretted leaving school at the earliest opportunity instead of going to college or (in their words) trying harder. Internalising educational failure in this way is indicative of what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic violence, a concept I return to later in the study (see Chapter 6).

The community showed signs of collective knowledge about the rigged conditions at play. For those exposed to structural barriers, who then observe their own struggles repeated in the lives of their children, the unfairness of the educational system is more apparent—such as in this discussion between mothers in Paul's community about UK educational policy:

> **Donna:** switched off the news. Total bollocks the government saying children with learning difficulties can be expelled for being problem kids. If these children had support they wouldn't be made to feel like outcasts

> **Cindy:** the gov need to put more money into helping children with special needs. What they gonna do, expel them all?

> **Nicola:** I've worked with kids with special needs, it takes time and patience but they can be the most loving souls when you gain their trust.

Instead of accepting the assignment of blame and punishment to children with learning disabilities, the women in this example make visible the structural and political factors that result in school inequalities (cf. Lareau, 2007; Reay, 1998). By focusing on learning disabilities, which are sources of educational disadvantage that have gained a degree of official recognition, the mothers publicly affirm the unfairness of the educational system. And rather than accepting that responsibility for schooling difficulties ought to lie with children or their parents, they deem the government accountable for inadequately funding educational provisions.

Whereas some mothers in Paul's community wanted an educational system more receptive to the needs of their children, other parents proposed more radical solutions to the problem, such as removing children from the harmful system altogether:

> **Jenny:** anyone know anyone that home schools in this area?

George: my sister does if that helps

Sue: I have a friend looking into it, she has 5 kids so could point you in the right direction

Pippa: can I ask why hun?

Jenny: a few big reasons... but mainly because the whole education system sucks. I want my girls to keep their imagination and creativity, and for them to be safe and to have free will to learn what they're interested in. I'm so excited to show them the world that school shuts out.

This discussion brings out the distinction between education as a process of learning, which parents in Paul's community greatly valued, and the institutionalised system of school, which for many was an unpleasant experience that failed to nurture and support intellectual growth (see Carlen, 1992). Although the full opportunities provided by school were not always immediately apparent, Paul's neighbours nevertheless widely valued and encouraged education, as other studies among working-class communities have found (Evans, 2006; Rogaly and Taylor, 2016: ch 5; Vincent, 1981). Women in Paul's community often self-described as a 'proud mummy' when their younger child performed well in school, was awarded student of the week, had the best homework, or received a good report on parent-teacher evenings. Other parents referred to their older children doing well in exams, and on three occasions, I observed parents praising their children for obtaining an A or B as their end-of-school subject grades. Although it was mothers who primarily took on the role of praising children for school achievements, they praised boys doing well in school in a comparable way to girls.

Despite parents imparting the value of education to the youth, teenagers in Paul's community ultimately shared scepticism about the fairness of school as well. Take the next extract, for example, in which a teenage boy attempts to challenge the educational system in which they are obliged to participate.

Declan: imagine if we didn't have to go to school. That would be ace

Sarah-Jane: you would end up a bum

Declan: yeah, but so would everyone else.

The discussion shows an awareness of the defining nature of school achievement and how a pupil's performance interconnects with those of others. Declan fantasises about a state of play where there is no schooling. In doing so, he brings to attention what Bourdieu (1977) terms the *doxa*—the presumed natural order of the social world—and imagines what life would be like if the current structure did not exist. In Declan's thought experiment, if no one went to school, then everyone would

'end up a bum'; and if everyone were to 'end up a bum', then the distinctions created by the educational system would cease to have effect: we would (according to the thought experiment) achieve a form of equality. This resembles Bourdieu's (1984) thesis that it is precisely because of the exclusionary nature of capital (in its different forms) that some can generate advantage over others. Indeed, for Bourdieu, school is a prime site for the reproduction of advantage, to the severe detriment of those lacking the required social resources.

AN ALTERNATIVE GAME

In response to the classed environment of the school, Paul found another role for himself, one to which he was far better suited: creating new and innovative ways to make other students laugh. Like the 'lads' in Paul Willis's (1977) ethnography,[2] Paul relished classroom pranks which lightened the school day (cf. Woods, 1976; Nayak and Kehily, 2001). One of his favourite activities was using his chemistry skills to make an explosive substance, which he and two friends would use to line the inside lids of fellow pupils' desks. When the lids were closed, they made a bang, giving the teacher and other students a surprise. Carol remembers Paul once snuck out of class to play a perfected rendition of Tchaikovsky's 'Nutcracker' on the school corridor piano, which bellowed through the classrooms—'Caroline,' asked the teacher, instantly knowing who the naughty culprit would be, 'is Paul in today?' Paul managed to memorise the song by watching his father perform. Paul's father had played the piano during his wartime service, and his ability to sight-read music earned him free drinks in local pubs—something of a lifeline for a heavy drinker during lengthy periods of unemployment.

Even the types of jokes Paul participated in reflected his class background. Paul enjoyed practical jokes, which combined his creativity with hands-on skills, rather than jokes of an abstract, and possibly less disruptive, nature, such as puns, which involve a linguistic mastery more commonly cultivated among the advantaged (cf. Lareau, 2011; Nayak and Kehily, 2001). From a pedagogical perspective, the classroom prankster might be an unwelcome nuisance, seemingly only acting in defiance of the school rules. Yet research in working-class communities recurrently finds humour to be an important means of coping with the stresses of poverty, serving as a vital levelling force (Rogaly and Taylor, 2016: 79–80). For example, Gillian Evans (2006: 35–6) observes how humour can be an effective challenge to inequality, for a shared joke brings people to the same level, teasing away pretensions, and creates a sense of similarity among those who share in the enjoyment of the laugh. The extent to which the humour is a levelling force depends on the status of the prankster and the target of the joke: humour that targets a more powerful subject might act to level out social differences, whereas a joke that targets

---

[2] Here, I refer to Paul Willis the sociologist and not Paul Willis my father—there is no relation.

a less powerful subject could become a form of domination, an issue I return to in Chapter 8. By making authority figures the target of the joke, school afforded Paul an opportunity to cultivate alternative social skills, which may have involved encouraging his peers to acknowledge their shared subordination and humanity, rather than 'putting his head down' to pursue self-advancement, which would afford him a higher social status, as per legitimate standards. While the formal terms of school did not value these skills, they became useful when Paul began his working life.

Paul left school with nine low-grade O-Levels. He later retook his science A-Levels in a technical college and was offered a place to read chemistry at degree level at Warwick University. In the months between sitting his A-Levels and waiting for university to begin, Paul searched for a full-time job to tide him over. A friend who worked at the Golden Wonder crisp factory helped him find work there as a nightshift cleaner. Though the hours were long, the job paid well, and Paul was able to earn more than his father and grandfather had done. It was the first time he tasted economic independence. From the moment Paul opened his first pay packet, he never wanted to return to being poor again: university was no longer an option. Paul surrendered his place at Warwick University and decided to work in industry instead, just as his mother, father, and grandparents before him had done.

Turning down university was an important moment in Paul's trajectory, and it was a decision that his family struggled to understand: why would such a capable young man seemingly throw away such a life-changing opportunity? Following his rejection of university, Paul's father and sister perceived him as a failure who had simply chosen not to continue education. However, individualising Paul's decision seems erroneous when we consider the fact that many individuals in comparable socio-economic positions have taken the same path, even in present times when university attendance is more common. Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor (2016: 157), for example, found that participants in their English study, some of whom had significant academic potential, opted to stay in their working-class locality rather than pursue education elsewhere. Valerie Walkerdine and Luis Jimenez (2012: 66–9) similarly observe how former steelworkers in a Welsh post-industrial town have great difficulty moving away. In keeping with these qualitative studies, census data indicates that pursuing higher university education is still the exception rather than the rule in Corby: the town was recorded as having the second-lowest rates of young people entering higher education in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2014: 30), and as having among the lowest rates of school social mobility in the UK (Social Mobility Commission, 2017).

These collective patterns suggest that Paul's decision to turn down university is not best explained only in individualistic terms, for we still need to make sense of why so many young men in Paul's class position make this same 'choice'. According to John Goldthorpe's (1998) rational actor perspective, economic considerations are noteworthy, since the ability to earn immediate wages over prospective future earnings is arguably a rational one for a working-class man in Paul's position to make. Indeed, Paul and his mother both cited economic factors as the main reason

why he turned down university. Yet a lifetime of conversations with my father, and so a deep familiarity with the values he imparted, leads me to believe that there is a deeper explanation for the vocational path he pursued.

As we saw, Paul's position in the educational field was not a comfortable one: school was not a place where he naturally excelled. Instead, school was a site of failure, where Paul's personality and humour were constantly reprimanded. Rather than being treated as a morally good person, at school Paul was viewed as naughty and unruly. Consequently, the emotions school invoked for Paul were unpleasant ones, such as frustration, shame, and embarrassment (cf. Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Sayer, 2005). By contrast, when Paul entered the factory floor, he fitted in, like a fish in water, and it felt good. This setting was where Paul gained a sense of belonging and found value in the relationships he fostered. For Paul, to detach himself from the collective body that he was part of, which generations of his forefathers had helped develop and relied on for survival, invoked a sense of fear and dread. Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) encourage us to recognise this sort of phenomenon as collective trauma born from the experiences of precarity which invoke survival responses in inheritors of such conditions. Instead of explaining Paul's trajectory in terms of rational choice, I propose that Paul's entry into industry formed part of an intergenerational process in which he was deeply entwined, which necessitated a different kind of rationality and an alternative logic.

DREAMS OF SUCCESS

Some of Paul's friends explicitly referred to themselves as having done well despite struggling in school. One young woman described herself as 'proving everyone wrong' by bucking the trend and managing to secure a place at university, notwithstanding school difficulties. Another man in his thirties reflected on how a teacher told him he would 'get nowhere in life with his attitude', and yet he had worked his way up to a high-salaried city job and owned various properties and flashy cars. In response, many of his friends congratulated him on his success. Similarly, a woman in her late twenties described herself as 'born and bred on the Lincoln estate' (one of the most disadvantaged and stigmatised council estates in Corby, on which Paul also lived), and yet she had been promoted to a management role. Those sharing stories of 'riffraff done well' emphasised the notion that 'if you never give up, you can do it too.' In this way, Paul's peers heavily individualise narratives of success; they present achievement as the result of hard work, individual effort, and fortitude—as possible for anyone who tried hard enough (cf. Gillies, 2005; Hey, 2003; Lamont, 2009; Silva, 2013).

Some of the most disadvantaged young people in Paul's community expressed the belief that determination is all it takes to overcome structural marginalization, even in the absence of educational qualifications. Some youths ferociously kicked back against a perception that because of their disengagement in school and

involvement in alternative lifestyles, they would never achieve material desires. Martin, for example, a teenager who carried the weight of being a carer for a terminally ill single parent, railed against that expectation: 'I've had enough of people telling me I aint gonna do anything with ma life. Yeah I drink and smoke weed every day with ma mates, but I know one day I'm gunna be living in ma own house with a sound car.'

Despite doing things contrary to perceived societal expectations—the daily drinking and smoking of cannabis in the period of youth—Martin's hope for his future is to be part of wider society and achieve legitimate forms of success. In essence, Martin dreams of an autonomous existence. Material ambitions to become a homeowner and have a nice car are recurringly found in studies that examine the perspective of working-class men (cf. Rogaly and Taylor, 2016: 97; Winlow and Hall, 2006: 36–7). Coupled with a belief in individual agency, work is especially important, for it is one of the only avenues which allows the working class to legitimately realise material aspirations.

FROM STEELWORK TO PRECARIOUS WORK

Paul had ambitions to excel in his working life. It did not take long working as a nightshift cleaner at the Golden Wonder factory before his strengths were noticed. First, he was promoted to a chemist role, and eventually given his own office where he was responsible for solving technical issues within the company when they surfaced. For instance, if a machine malfunctioned or an issue in production arose, managers called on Paul to find a solution and report on how it could be resolved again in the future. Although he was an asset to the company, Paul felt frustrated when university graduates joined the factory in comparable roles while being paid grossly higher salaries. Dissatisfied with the disparity, Paul insisted on a fair pay rise. When his employer offered only a nominal wage increase, Paul resigned from the job and found alternative employment at the steelworks.

Paul joined the Corby Steel Works as an electrician's mate, and soon picked up the trade. The work was initially based in the coke ovens of the works, which Paul described as 'a terrifying and unfriendly place'. Paul had difficulty breathing near the ovens and recalled having to step outside for fresh air. At times, he would cough up a thick black mucus mixed with blood, which troubled him. Paul was fortunate that others recognised his methodical way of thinking and chemistry skills and encouraged him to apply for the position of Metallurgical Technician. In his promoted role, Paul tested the quality of the steel being produced. While the conditions at the steelworks were hard, even brutal at times, Paul's intelligence was fostered, and he found the job rewarding.

Paul looked back on the steelworks years as some of the best of his life. He especially enjoyed the company of his workmates, who shared the same sense of humour and appreciation of a good prank. Just as Paul's chemistry education

enhanced his pranking abilities as a schoolboy, so too did his electrician's skills as a young adult—potentially a deadly combination. One of Paul's best executed jokes involved rigging a foghorn to the inside of a work friend's locker, so when his friend arrived to start an early shift, on opening his locker he was greeted with an ear-shattering alarm call. Another prank involved rewiring a clothing iron a workmate had brought in for repair, so when it was plugged in, instead of heating up, it sparked and exploded. Unlike in school, where such humour was chastised and punished, in the steelworks, Paul recalls the workforce cheering on innovative pranks. Practical jokes generated moments of collective enjoyment, which added variety to the otherwise monotonous shifts.

Like many industrial towns in England, Corby suffered a devastating blow in 1979 when the imminent closure of the steelworks was finally announced (Rusbridger, 1979). Into the 1980s and onwards, a significant part of Britain's industrial base was dismantled, which marked a historical shift from a producer economy to a neoliberal service—and finance-based one. Around 20,000 people, more than 30 percent of Corby's population, either directly or indirectly lost their jobs, giving Corby the second-highest rate of unemployment in the UK (Corby District Council, 1989). Unable to find alternative employment, large numbers of residents left the town (Addis and Mercer, 2000). Those who remained lived through the loss of industry, social deprivation, and a period of economic and social neglect.

Although Paul was among the thousands of people forced into unemployment, unlike many others, he was able to secure alternative work by becoming a fulltime, self-employed mobile grocer. Paul purchased his first mobile shop van from a neighbour in 1978 who allowed Paul to pay off the debt in weekly instalments from profits made. At the start, it looked like this debt would take quite some time to settle—on his first day as a 'van man', Paul had one customer, who bought a single packet of painkillers. During the early years, Paul ran the mobile shop part-time, alongside shift work at the steelworks. However, when the steelworks closed down, Paul kept the van going full time. To generate a sustainable income to support his family, Paul had to work long hours, deep into the night, seven days a week, taking only two weeks off over Christmas. Paul continued to run the mobile shop in this way for thirty-five years, renovating two replacement vans along the way. Paul eventually retired on 31 August 2015 at the age of sixty-eight. As an indication of Paul's earnings, in the last ten years of his work—working lengthy hours, seven days a week, fifty weeks of the year—his annual net profits ranged from £9,000 to £12,000; the average national income at that time was £22,800 in 2005 and £27,600 in 2015.

THE WINTER OF PRECARITY

In a contemporary study of ex-steelworkers in a post-industrial town in Wales, Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012: ch 2) reflect on how precarity has been a long-running feature of the steel industry (cf. Edwards, 2000; Moody, 2019). They note that steelwork, being intricately tied to the global economy, continuously fluctuates, requiring industrial communities to adapt to the periods of high demand and corresponding work and periods of low demand with little to no work. Mindful of these patterns of fluctuation, they observe how the complete closure of the steel industry, and the accompanying demolition of the steelworks plants, created new forms of insecurity and disrupted strategies of survival that steel-working families had fostered through the generations. This analysis might help us grasp the intensity of the struggles that Paul and his community likewise faced following the closure of the Corby steelworks.

The employment scene in Corby following the closure of the steelworks was bleak, and it soon required external intervention. In 1979, Corby was granted 'Development Area Status', and received funds from the European Economic Community (since incorporated into the European Union) to become a designated 'Enterprise Zone' (Read, 1982). Accordingly, businesses were incentivised to relocate to Corby, and a more varied factory and industrial presence gradually grew on the outskirts of the town. Even though the 2001 census indicated that unemployment in Corby was beginning to return closer to the national average (Office for National Statistics, 2001), areas of unemployment became concentrated, particularly on the Lincoln estate, where Paul lived and where his van route was based.[3] In the 2001 census, 6,594 people (approximately 16 percent of the town population) fell into category E, which includes those on state benefit, unemployed, or lowest-grade workers, and a further 11,326 people (approximately 28 percent) were recorded as being semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers (Office for National Statistics, 2001). Comparably, the 2011 census records the major employment in Corby to be in manufacturing, accounting for 38 percent of employment, with only 2 percent of residents in the town recorded as being engaged in 'professional, scientific, and technical activities' (UK Census Data, 2011).

Mike Savage et al. (2013), who conducted a contemporary study of class in Britain, report on a similar employment landscape: they found large parts of Corby to be home to the most socio-economically disadvantaged. Influenced by Bourdieu, Savage et al. devised a survey to record levels of economic, social, and cultural capital of British individuals, which led them to propose a seven-tiered class system. The most advantaged class in the stratification is termed 'elite', which consists of

---

[3] The 2001 Census recorded unemployment in Corby at 4.2 percent, compared with the national average of this time, which was 3.4 percent. And in 2001, the rate of unemployment in the Kingswood area was 6.6 percent, compared to the national average of 3.4 percent. Figures in 2007 again recorded the Lincoln estate to have a higher level of unemployment compared to the rest of the town, and almost double the national average (Corby Borough Council, 2007: 19).

individuals with the highest, concentrated levels of economic, social, and cultural capital; the least advantaged class is classified as the 'precariat', which comprises individuals with the lowest levels of economic, social, and cultural capital (BBC, 2013b). Savage et al.'s classifications would place most of Corby, including the Lincoln estate and surrounding areas where Paul's community is formed, in the 'precariat' category (BBC, 2013a). On the outskirts of Corby, Savage et al. identify a cluster of 'new affluent workers', which includes trade workers such as plumbers and electricians, who have been able to acquire substantial economic capital. Common occupations within the precariat include cleaners, van drivers, care workers, carpenters and joiners, caretakers, security guards, shopkeepers, retail cashiers, and warehouse and factory labourers, among others (Savage et al., 2013: 232–3).

The description by Savage et al. of a precariat landscape reflects my qualitative observations. Many of Paul's neighbours worked in insecure waged-industrial and service-sector employment or were experiencing unemployment. Community posts online recurrently reference shift- and waged-work. Specific types of employment mentioned included factory and warehouse work; labouring, such as building, forklift driving, plastering, carpet-fitting, and landscaping; retail work in supermarkets; care work; and services such as hairdressing, bartending, lorry-driving, bookkeeping, and working for a taxi company. The only mentions of public-sector or salaried work were from a handful of people who worked as nurses, army personnel, or at the local council. A woman in her thirties summed up the common work trajectory in Paul's community in the following way: 'they were all riffraff back in the day but I'm sure they're all decent blue collar hard working men now'.

FINDING WORK: THE LUCKY ONES

Job scarcity and insecurity are a common part of daily life in Paul's community (cf. Beck and Camiller, 2000; MacDonald, 1999; Sennett, 2011). A question often asked was 'anyone know of anywhere taking on?'—to which others would respond with suggestions, or occasionally share some grim news: 'I've been looking for weeks now mate, nobody's taking on.' One young man recounted having submitted more than fifty applications to no avail. For some, the struggle to find work had become a source of severe distress; as one man announced in a status update, 'I am going to break down if work doesn't come through soon', and a middle-aged woman posted, 'I can't go on anymore. What more can a woman do to get a job round here? All I've done is applications, how much longer?' Another man announced, 'I'm gonna go loco soon and just get arrested and go back to jail, fuckin had enough man', which reveals the extent of choices perceived to be available (cf. Maguire, 2020). Such sentiments have been recorded in other English ethnographies among the precariat, such as by Lisa McKenzie (2015: 93–4), who documents feelings of

'hopelessness' experienced by some men from her council estate in their futile search for work.

The desperate struggle to access employment left many in the community reliant on the town's several private employment agencies, which offered to match workers to low-skilled employment in return for a cut of their earned income. Consequently, workers employed through agencies would earn substantially less than if they were able to work for the company directly, with the agency providing few, if any, work-related benefits, and little to no job security. One of Paul's friends expressed understandable frustration at 'working for £6.50 an hour while other non-agency staff get over £11', and another asked if anyone knew of any jobs going, since he 'had enough of working ridiculous hours for the agency and getting paid fuck all'. Indeed, agency work was portrayed as on par with selling drugs—a desperate last-choice line of work if nothing else came through. Some community participants claimed to work through an agency for years without ever being offered a permanent in-house job by the factory. Companies noted by community participants for recruiting workers on a long-term basis through agencies included RS Components, Solway Foods, and Oxford University Press.

Agency workers found they may end up at the very bottom of a labour hierarchy. For instance, one woman said she was laughed at by full time staff in a factory because she was made to mop the floor but received less money for the job than the cleaners earned. Similarly, Michèle Lamont (2009: 136–8) found in her study that white labourers in the US scorned part-time workers slightly more precariously positioned than themselves. Notably, Paul's precariat community, rather than ridiculing those at the bottom of the formal labour market, frequently shared empathy, more in line with the attitudes of the French white workers and US black workers in Lamont's study. Many individuals in Paul's community had worked through agencies and, therefore, instead of ridiculing agency workers, they directed anger at the agencies and companies who opted to employ through such exploitative means. The following conversation is infused with some of these frustrations and is illustrative of a general feeling among Paul's community about such labour practices.

Emma: any luck on the job front pal?

Dean: nothing mate, can you believe it? I'm proper pissed with these agency arseholes promising work to get you signed up, only to tell you it's quiet for the next few weeks and to ring back. I am signed up to 16 agencies, and not one can offer me anything

Emma: agencies, they're the biggest con. They killed the work industry. I heard there might be something coming up our end. Is your CPC [professional driving certificate] class 1 or 2?

Dean: bollocks. It expired with the new CPC Act. The government sure know how to fuck people over. It's killing me being out of work

Emma: that's unlucky. Those agencies are a waste of time, they pay you in pennies and treat you like shit. I swear there would be full-time jobs if they didn't exist.

Emma and Dean are critical of both employment agencies and the government. Emma suggests that the very existence of agencies has had a negative impact on working conditions. Indeed, Emma's observations chime with recent studies on agency and other forms of low-waged and precarious employment in Britain, which shine a light on how law and policy structures unequal and exploitative labour relationships (see Hayes, 2017; Shildrick et al., 2012). Dean further points to the fact that government policy—which in this instance rendered a qualification Dean obtained meaningless—may worsen already tough circumstances, rather than alleviating the hardship. Moreover, his experience demonstrates that even low-paid and exploitative agency work is not guaranteed. Flexible work, which responds to the needs of businesses, entails that workers like Dean face unpredictable periods of no work, but then must periodically work long hours when business picks up, which can have a devastating impact on claims for welfare support (see Shildrick, 2018).

Some in the community also blame the difficult employment environment on the competing presence of migrant workers. Corby received among the highest rates of Polish migrants in the country (The Economist, 2013), many of whom worked in similar low-skilled industries, which led to various tensions that become evident in the course of this study. Participants in Paul's community recurrently voiced belief that Polish workers were prioritised by employers, making it in their view even harder to find work. For example, a man in his thirties was frustrated with a factory he approached for work: according to Paul's friend, the manager agreed to contact him when a position became available, only for him to bump into '8 foreign guys' on the bus a few weeks later asking for directions to the very same factory to start work. One of the main reasons why community participants believed that employers prioritise migrant workers over longer-term local workers was because of a stronger work ethic, explained by a man in his twenties: 'That awkward moment when you ask for a pay rise and the gaffer says "the new polish bloke is doing your job better and faster than you!" (And for less money)'. In these instances, community participants view apparent migrant competition as an additional barrier to accessing work and fair pay.

Those in Paul's community employed outside of agencies also spoke of battling temporary contracts and reduced working hours, especially women. A woman in her early twenties posted: 'I'm not impressed, my hours have been cut from 60 to 30 with no warning, bang out of order.' Similarly, a woman in her fifties announced, 'it looks like I'll have to start from nothing again—the arseholes have cut my hours. I give up I really do. Talk about a massive hit to the confidence.' This experience echoes the feelings of a care worker interviewed by Lydia Hayes (2017: 38) who described herself as 'mentally bruised' from losing work. Like flexible hours,

reduced hours can have contradictory effects on government benefits, as a mother during her search for a part-time job explained: 'all our hours have just been cut to 10 a week, but if I don't do 16 I'll lose my tax credits. I'll then be working for £25 a week and will need to go back on benefits.'

In such a temperamental employment environment, the community frequently hoped for good luck to see a job come through. Some of Paul's friends willed for their 'luck to change', others kept their 'fingers crossed', and others still did all they could not to 'tempt fate'. The central place of luck and superstition among disadvantaged communities has long been documented (e.g. Charlesworth, 2000; Hoggart, 1957; Jones, 2012; Miller, 1964); gambling machines, bookies, and bingo halls are often not far away in socio-economically disadvantaged spaces. Current employment conditions in the UK expose disadvantaged individuals to fewer choices and more bad luck than other groups: the odds are stacked against them. By willing for their luck to change and invoking superstitions, community participants sought to gain a sense of control over the unavoidable precariousness of their lives.

The celebratory news of those fortunate to secure a job invoked collective, positive feelings. Extreme declarations were made when work came through, such as that by a woman who felt that being offered a job was 'the best news in the world', and a lady who claimed 'nothing's taking the smile from my face', having signed a contract to make her role permanent. Such posts received high numbers of 'likes' and congratulatory messages from friends. Emotions of appreciation and all-round hope for the future infused such positive news; participants were relieved 'not to be on the dole anymore', taking whatever hours they could and adopting phrases such as 'another day, another dollar'. Accordingly, we can see that, contrary to accusations in popular discourse that socio-economically disadvantaged persons in England are work-shy, the value and reality of work was central to the lives of Paul and his neighbours (cf. MacDonald et al., 2014; Wacquant, 2002).

Paul's employed friends often suffered long and unsociable hours of work. On several occasions, participants referred to feeling 'shattered' having just finished a lengthy shift, or shared daily declarations of tiredness, such as that by a woman who said she wanted to 'sleep for a week'. Outside of the working day, bed was often seen as the ultimate destination; one man explained it as 'the moment I have been waiting for all night'. Sometimes people note extreme tiredness; a woman described pain in her eyes, limbs, head, and brain, to indicate that 'this is exhaustion'. Nightshifts seemed to hit workers hardest. In a globalised economy, there is no time for many companies to close; therefore, despite well-documented detrimental mental and physical health effects of shift work (cf. Shildrick et al., 2012), the labour must go on. A man in his early twenties, having finished a nightshift rotation, described it as having 'well and truly fucked up my game'. A conversation between three middle-aged women in Paul's community illuminates this feeling of being thrown off from reality and the hardship of nightshift:

Shannon: nightshift catches up with you. All I've done since I finished work is sleep. I shouldn't feel this tired! Thank God I've four nights off

Linda: I know what you mean, I was a total nightmare on nightshifts. Even when you get free time, you waste it sleeping

Debs: it knocks you for six. I've just finished three weeks of it and I don't know whether I'm coming or going.

Such workers associated nightshifts with various sleep difficulties. Several wrote their frustrations at being unable to sleep through daytime noises, such as neighbours' decorating activities and children playing on the streets. Even workers on other shift patterns were sometimes affected by late-night noise that penetrated the walls of inadequately insulated homes (see Koch, 2016).

More generally, stress appears to be a common cause for sleep disturbance. While some workers were able to sleep as soon as their head hit the pillow, many others posted irritably, at various times of night, about being unable to sleep and having work the next day. One of Paul's friends wrote of being exhausted all day, but finding when they got into bed, all their worries suddenly came to the fore, snatching sleep away. Another woman 'had a dream [she] got sacked', illustrative of a looming sense of dread that hung over some of the precariously employed in Paul's community—the stress of losing work never far away.

FIRED FOR FARTING: THE UNLUCKY ONES

A fate worse than reduced hours, some lost their jobs altogether, either by being made redundant or due to closure of the firm. A number of companies liquidated during the research period (Davies, 2016). One of the most notable closures in 2014 was that of Solways Food factory, which led to the loss of 900 jobs (BBC News, 2014). On learning about the likely closure of a high-street shop, a middle-aged woman shared her anxiety: 'redundancy for me I think... hard times ahead'. This theme of workplace dismissal accords with Tracy Shildrick et al.'s research (2012: 134–6) into insecure work in Britain. The authors found that, although some workers reported dismissal due to behavioural infringements, they were often involuntarily dismissed.

While some workers in Paul's community lost their job when a company went bust, others were put through disciplinary procedures for misbehaving, eventually being told by their employers that they had lost their job due to their own doing. As one man reported, 'have disciplinary tomorrow (second one) with the big cheese, me and santa will both be getting the sack for xmas'. A mother in her early twenties, already dismissed from work for not turning up to a shift, explained why: 'Just so everyone knows, yeah I did get sacked but the real reason I couldn't turn up to my shift was 'cus I had important family things to take care of. Of course my family is worth more than my job!' The post received wide community approval and close to

a hundred 'likes', which illustrates how the value of family is treated as a higher good than waged-labour, especially for mothers. On another occasion, a man employed through an agency reported being 'sacked' for attending a job interview. Appalled, his friend advised him to go to the Citizens Advice Bureau because 'they can't do that, you're allowed to go to interviews'. However, the dismissed worker had already sought such help and was informed 'if you're on a zero-hour agency contract then they can do what they want'.

A further recently unemployed community participant, a man in his twenties, claimed he 'got fired for taking a shit'. Comparably, another claimed that workers in his factory 'can't even go for a piss without an explanation'. Paul's friends often expressed fear of being penalised for 'shitting' or 'farting', something so necessary. I observed several metaphors related to the prohibition of defecation, often made in explicit terms by men to describe the surveillance of factory managers. The usage of crude language such as 'shitting', 'farting', and 'pissing' can be seen as a rejection of standards of respectability and bourgeois manners, which speaks to how undignified the conditions of precarious work in contemporary Britain have become (cf. Ndjio, 2005).

In an undercover investigation of insecure employment inside an Amazon warehouse, James Bloodworth (2016) vividly details the barriers in place that prevented workers from accessing the toilets, which included installing limited facilities, often at a great distance from workstations, and requiring employees to pass through security gates to reach them. In this context, Bloodworth came across a bottle of urine on the warehouse floor, suggestive of the alternative solutions workers had found to ease their bladders during the working day. Likewise, in an inquiry on the conditions of agency workers in the meat and poultry processing sector, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010: 11) reported that some workers were denied toilet breaks and documented 'the lasting impact of the humiliation of workers urinating and bleeding on themselves while working at the production line'. Repeat findings that the state and employers have intruded into the most necessary human behaviour, such as toilet usage, casts doubt on just how free, autonomous, and dignified precarious work in Britain is. The liberal aspiration of autonomy is completely undermined when the state permits employers to take proxy control (by fear of reprisal) even of workers' bladder and bowel movements.

Alongside encroachment into rest breaks, increased levels of employer surveillance have also restricted other historic forms of defiance by workers, including limiting the pace of labour output and finding ways to share laughs during the working day (cf. McClintock, 1995: 253). The following representative conversation between a group of Paul's friends who worked at the same factory provides a window into the extent of employer surveillance on the factory floor.

> **Andy:** it's gonna be an interesting year – I've only been back six shifts and I've already received two formals and an interview for so-called bullying. Then wake up this morning to be handed a formal letter

Jim: what happened son?

Andy: first shift back after the bank holiday and my lift fell through. Now I'm getting done for being late. I had to sign for that shit and all

Jim: you're kidding me. It's becoming a miserable place to work. Did you hear about the motion detectors they're bringing in? It calls when you're not moving

Andy: motion detectors?! Aren't the cameras enough? You'd get more freedom in prison these days. I'm honestly scared to fart without a good excuse

Jim: It will only get worse from here on in.

In addition to cameras, Jim and Andy speak of their unease of further intrusive measures rumoured to come, when 'motion detectors' will mean that the movement of their bodies will no longer be fully their own. Not only does the tight surveillance point to the lack of autonomy and trust afforded to precariously positioned workers, for community participants, these conditions are comparable to imprisonment. By once again describing the fear of farting, Andy draws attention to how difficult it has become for workers to know how to behave; for the modern-day precariat worker, their biological human form is grounds for failure.

Absent further information, Andy's reference to 'so-called bullying' in the last extract could be interpreted many ways. One possibility is that it relates to workplace banter. In an ethnography of a working-class community in the north of England, Katharine Smith (2012) pays attention to the practice of banter and the importance it has in everyday conversations in working-class spaces. According to Smith (2012: ch 4), 'having a banter' involves the exchange of quick-witted insults which might be controversial at times, often arising between people who consider themselves companions. Rather than being a tool to offend, Smith analyses the practice of banter as creating a sense of equality between those who engage in it, like the use of humour and practical jokes in school: making fun of difference may bring inequalities to the surface and level them out. However, Smith (2012: 115) notes that if banter is not taken in the spirit intended, then it can be misrecognised as a form of bullying. Nonetheless, it remains possible for humour, even if delivered in the form of banter, to be used as a means of asserting power over a less advantaged work colleague—an issue I return to in Chapter 8.

Plausibly, employer fears about worker motivation feed the need to surveil and control workers. Indeed, the presumption that the most disadvantaged in the social hierarchy will refuse to work and must be coerced into productive activity has been a long-running feature of global capitalism and is arguably built into the structure of modern-day labour relations. W.E.B. Du Bois (1917) suggests the violent enslavement of persons from the African continent established the foundations for current economic relationships: 'Modern world commerce, modern imperialism, the modern factory system and the modern labor problem began with the African slave

trade.' In keeping with this view, Howard Winant (2001) and Lisa Lowe (2015), among others, reject clear-cut distinctions when characterising the transition from chattel slavery to other forms of labour in the modern capitalist economy, as older methods of coercion infused into later labour forms. Reflecting on the English context, Douglas Hay and Paul Craven (2004) detail how various legislative changes from the fourteenth century onwards were designed to coerce the least advantaged to labour for the benefit of the landed classes, which included a whole host of legal measures from the dispossession of land to the introduction of laws on vagrancy, and statutes that regulated the relationships between masters and servants. Therefore, while the trans-Atlantic slave trade exhibited the most violent and overtly coercive forms of labour exploitation, we can place modern labour relations on a continuum of exploitative and imbalanced relations.

In the present, employment legislation in England and Wales continues to reinforce and structure the inequalities of the labour market. Hayes's (2017) ethnographic study of female care workers in England reveals deep disparities in employment law and the devastating effects which such minimal protections have on those consigned to the most precarious forms of work. Hayes's legal analysis of precarious work in the care sector shows that the legislative framework leans heavily on the employer's side. Like those in Paul's community who suffered extensive punishment at work, the accounts of Hayes's interviewees are infused with anxiety about the fear of losing work for any small act: as one of the participants explained, '[i]f you do just one thing wrong, they get rid of you' (2017: 75). Hayes (2017: ch 2) demonstrates that temporary contracts, which supposedly provide more autonomy, choice, and flexibility for workers as well as employers, have rendered low-paid workers in Britain less powerful and more disposable. Hayes (2017: 90–91) argues that the law, by treating precarious employment as a contractual rather than a public policy issue, favours the power of the employer to create the terms of contractual obligations, leaving workers unprotected and easily exploited. The legal framework here threatens the possibility of autonomous existence for the least advantaged (notwithstanding that such deregulation and worker flexibility may be presented as supporting the individual freedom of the employee).

CONCLUSION

I opened the chapter by detailing a presupposition of mainstream criminal law theory: that of a legal subject who is autonomous and fully responsible for the consequences of their chosen actions. In contrast to older liberal theories, I noted how a revised liberal position tends to recognise that we require minimal conditions to manifest the ideal of the autonomous individual. On Raz's terms, this includes access to an adequate range of options and a variety of qualitative goods, having an awareness of available options, and having independence to make choices. However, by examining the collective experiences of persons among the most

socio-economically disadvantaged in English society, we have begun to see that autonomy-conducive conditions are far from available to all. The English education system continues to operate by original design, as an institution to control socio-economically disadvantaged children and encourage them to accept their place in the social order, rather than providing an equal opportunity to flourish. Likewise, the coercive and exploitative labour relations that formed the basis of the modern capitalist system continue to vibrate into the present, albeit now in transmuted and less overt forms.

In a society structured to make use of coercive, exploitative, and unregulated forms of labour, regardless of how much potential an individual has and how deeply they aspire to autonomy, the most marginalised in the social order will inevitably be consigned to such labour roles. Although a lucky individual might escape this fate, these instances appear to be the exceptions—the anomalies—and not the rule. For the most underprivileged in the collective, the odds are heavily stacked against them, which makes enduring a life of limited autonomy likely. The liberal ideal of the autonomous individual struggles to materialise, except as aspirational, in these conditions, where the imbalance of power has left the most disadvantaged describing their experiences at work as though they are 'scared to fart without a good excuse'. Survival in conditions where even bowel and bladder movements are under an employer's command requires developing resilience to gruelling and humiliating working conditions.

It is in this context that an alternative normative orientation becomes visible. Individuals in the English precariat experience the world differently to how advantaged individuals do. From the perspective of those in Paul's community, it is easier to grasp that autonomy is not a given, a shared reality, but only something aspired to in the distance. While participants in Paul's community pursue autonomy, in conditions where it is out of reach, they require and access the support of others. Instead of acting exclusively on the logic of self-advancement, they live by other norms, such as by prioritising family and kin. Criminal lawyers and criminologists must gain a better appreciation of this different normative orientation to grasp the conflicts that surface among those most directly affected by criminal justice processes. It is to this task I now turn. In the next chapters, we will illuminate a moral framework operative in Paul's community, rooted not in autonomy, but an alternative logic of mutuality.