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1

Home Away from Home

Through the buildings in place, we can understand the people, and through the people the buildings. Through an entangled dialectic, they form part of each other and mediate each other's existence and significance in the practices of everyday life.

CHRISTOPHER TILLEY¹

IT IS a bright Sunday evening in May. I am revising for my MSc exams, spending much of my time in the overcrowded LSE library, jostling for space at the worktables dotted around the huge light-filled space. At the same time, I am also preparing, with very little notice, for a job interview at FPS, scheduled to take place at 10am the following morning. The interview process for a secondary school teaching job in Britain is relatively unique, in that one of the many elements involves teaching a lesson to a group of selected students, to demonstrate among other things that you have at least some semblance of ability to manage a class full of children. So, alongside revising for an exam to test my knowledge of the anthropology of kinship, sex and gender, I am also creating a PowerPoint to deliver a short lesson to a group of 24 12-year-old boys.

The next day I walk up to the school from the nearest station, passing through the streets of one of the wealthiest parts of the country, past boutique shops, townhouses and a picturesque

churchyard. The impressive main building of the school becomes visible as I approach: a grand, red-bricked building dating back to the early 1900s with large windows and intricate, well-kept stone masonry. It would not look out of place if it were to be picked up and transported to Oxford or Cambridge. Tall wrought-iron railings act as a barrier between the pavement and strips of manicured lawn running along the front of the main building. Grand stone steps lead up to imposing front double doors: the original entrance to the school. I report to the glassy, newly built reception where the head of department waits to escort me to her teaching rooms, located in a building adjacent to the main block of the school, affectionately known as the ‘annexe’. The classroom where I am to deliver my lesson is located here, in a poorly lit room, containing mismatched tables and regulation plastic chairs in need of replacement. I distinctly remember being taken aback by the state of the teaching rooms in contrast to the impressive main building I was confronted with on the street.

I soon found myself stood in front of a group of rowdy boys as they piled their way into the classroom, bags slung onto the floor and folders filled with dog-eared pieces of paper flung onto desks. Embarrassingly, as the lesson started, I thought I recognised one of the boys in the class and asked him if he may have been a student at my previous school. Hilarity ensued as the rest of the class informed me that I had recognised him from the TV, where he recently played a character in a popular show. Getting the boys back on track after this incident proved tricky, but I liked their spark and the way they engaged with my questions. They weren’t embarrassed to contribute to the discussion, generating a feeling of excitement and energy in the room which I appreciated. After a strange meeting with the head of the school at the time in his office,² where he offered me a significant pay rise relative to my previous role (and for less responsibility), I shook his hand and accepted the job.

My research prior to the interview, as well as my knowledge of the school due to historical and family connections, informed me

that FPS is an academically selective, independent day school located in the South of England. It caters for students from the age of 11 to 18 (with a linked junior school and nursery). Girls are admitted in the sixth form but make up a significant minority of the total sixth-form population. The school is considered one of the top independent schools in the country by the *Good Schools Guide*,³ fulfilling all of the characteristics of the typical 'elite' school as discussed in the introduction to this book. The vast majority of school pupils live in the local area, with some travelling to school from slightly further away. As such, I was aware that FPS is thought of among the pupils, parents and staff body as a community school, predominantly serving the local vicinity.

As I experienced in that first lesson I taught as part of my interview, students at FPS are energetic and bright with multiple different interests encouraged by both the school and within families. My form groups⁴ over the years consisted of boys with significant musical talent, scientists, artists and mathematicians, including a keen chemist who enjoying making his own instruments as a hobby. And these varied interests are encouraged and enabled by the autonomy provided to private schools in relation to their curriculum in Britain, where breadth and flexibility is emphasised with, for example, the core curriculum at Key Stage 4 (referring to the British curriculum at the school for those between the ages of 14 and 16) limited to just four subjects (this is very low compared to the equivalent requirements at other schools), enabling the students to choose from as wide a range of other subjects as possible to take on at GCSE.⁵ Exam results at A-level are excellent, and students therefore go on to receive offers from some of the country's leading universities, with a significant number now making applications to elite institutions abroad (there are teachers within the staff body for whom supporting students with their overseas applications is a part of their job description).

As well as the school's excellent academic achievements, it also prides itself on the standard of pastoral guidance and support provided by teaching staff. Form groups are relatively small and meet

with teachers every day for an extended period of time in the morning. Students also have access to a head of year who has overall accountability for their welfare within the school. The same head of year accompanies them throughout their time at the school, so they have a familiar point of contact, enabling the fostering of extremely strong student–teacher relationships as well as an enduring line of communication between home and the school (as discussed further in later chapters). Moreover, the breadth of co-curricular provision is vast, with over 100 different clubs and societies (including MUN and debating) running throughout the academic year. The extent of the co-curricular provision is supported by the school’s facilities, which are as enviable as you might expect from one of the top independent schools in the country. The students (and teachers) benefit from a gym with a swimming pool, tennis courts and basketball courts, an auditorium for school productions and three further lecture theatres as well as a newly refurbished library with additional spaces for students and teachers to work and meet.

Visitors to FPS, as I was on that first day, need to report to the reception area to be signed in and provided with a visitor lanyard. Permanent staff, however, are allowed to enter via the front drive through heavy double doors, an entrance which takes you straight into a wood-panelled waiting room containing cushioned benches and a vintage mahogany table adorned with copies of *Tatler*,⁶ the *Good Schools Guide* and miscellaneous school publications. The school and headteacher’s office adjoin the waiting room as does the staff room and the striking, cavernous grand assembly hall, all of which retain the feel of ‘pseudo-aristocratic’ history and tradition: high ceilings, wood panelling and an air of stiff formality. A walk along a corridor lined with classrooms takes you to the dining hall, a room of similar stature to the assembly hall but smaller and with lower ceilings, where portraits of middle-aged white men bear down on students sat on long wooden refectory benches, hurriedly eating plates heaped high with lunch. Engraved gold-lettered lists of previous head boys (and now also head girls) line

the walls nearest to the stairs which, like the portraits of ex-headmasters, act as a constant reminder of the history and rituals that create and recreate the school's sense of itself.

The grand communal 'frontstage' spaces of the main entrance, assembly hall and dining hall run in stark contrast to the appearance of some of the other, more informal or what social psychologist Erving Goffman⁷ would describe as 'backstage' spaces around the school, including, as I quickly found out, the dark yet very well used 'annexe' located near the school's main building. A wide windowless room in the centre of the annexe contains table tennis tables, a section of uncomfortable amphitheatre-style plastic seating of questionable use and never-ending open shelving units containing packs of paper, exercise books, files and file dividers stored in no particular order. The space is underused (apart from at lunchtime when keen table tennis players of all age groups play loud and enthusiastic matches, their shouts echoing through the expanse of strip-lit space) and relatively unloved. Classrooms requiring maintenance lead out from a narrow corridor surrounding the main room on all sides, their regulation plastic school chairs uneven and in poor supply, with students often to be found raiding a next-door classroom for a chair to sit on in their lesson. Most of the time the annexe is left out of tours of the school, for both staff and parents. Its classrooms and windowless territory is used all day every day, but it is not recognised as a space suitable to present to an outside audience.

The rest of the school is composed of other similarly unkempt classrooms and corridors, fit for what we might call a 'backstage' audience. The doors leading to the classrooms radiating out from the main assembly hall are equally deceptive in that once you are through the outwardly imposing door, you may well be greeted with posters hanging precariously off walls, rows of mismatched desks with chairs toppled onto their side or in clusters around one specific desk where students have decided to congregate during a break in the day. The walls of these classrooms are usually bare; where displays exist, they may be outdated and created by

students or staff who have long since left the school. A trip to the science labs provides a similar experience—the rooms are clean and well-resourced but treated in a relaxed manner by both the students and the teachers; students' bags and clothes are strewn haphazardly across the desks at the back of the classrooms and teachers' papers and books are similarly scattered across the desk at the front of the classroom. The treatment of the school space is mirrored one by the other, resulting in the functionality of classrooms, although generally fine and fit for purpose, running in stark contrast to the commanding and ceremonial environments of the school's grand communal spaces.

The above paradox or inherent tension between the formality and grandeur of the outward-facing appearance of FPS and the reality of what goes on inside the buildings is one that continually cropped up in varying guises throughout my time teaching and carrying out research for this book. It is most obviously manifested in relation to the built environment, where a distinction can clearly be observed between imposing communal spaces where large ritual gatherings such as assemblies take place, in contrast to the teaching classrooms, where the majority of the teaching and learning occurs and where both students and teachers spend most of their time. This variance in the treatment and respect for differing school spaces reflects a set of priorities where it is precisely the spaces where lessons happen, or where the school community spend most of their time, that are often left relatively uncared for. Instead, it is the grand, historical places of elite school ritual that are protected and celebrated. The inner workings of the school reflect a much more relaxed and casual ambience than the veneer of formality presented by the grand, red-bricked main building.

Relatively casual treatment of the school space by both staff and students is evident at all times of day: before school, lunchtimes and during after school clubs and societies. A stark example can be identified through the school's partnership with a drama academy delivering specialist lunchtime and after school sessions. Boys from across all year groups are provided with the opportunity to attend

sessions and work towards the achievement of various awards through an examinations process. Rehearsals for the exams take place in the drama classroom, a relatively small room located up three flights of narrow stairs in one of the newer school buildings. It is a square room consisting of moveable black plastic chairs and a narrow mirror stretching along one side of the otherwise bare walls. One lone desk and a monitor sit in the corner of the room attached to the interactive whiteboard indicating the front of the classroom (other than this the space is used freely and flexibly).

Observing a rehearsal for the assessed examination one evening, my attention is drawn to the state of the room: books, bags and coats are dispersed across the row of chairs at the back. The build-up of an entire day's worth of emptied packets of various snacks litters the floor, despite this being an event that parents have been invited to attend. And attend they do—a line of them sit keenly on the front row waiting for their sons' turn on the stage. The parents immerse themselves fully in the experience of the event, contributing to the class discussion facilitated by the teacher when she asks for feedback from the audience. They do not seem in any way taken aback by the level of untidiness in the room. Instead the atmosphere of the session is supportive, constructive and relaxed; it feels as if the parents are having a chat over a cup of tea in one of their homes.

It became clear while observing the rehearsal that the outcome of the experiences of the individuals in the room is placed above the state of the room itself in terms of importance. It is the performance of the students, and the interactions between them, that mattered to those watching and performing in this instance. The students, parents and staff are not fazed by the nature of the space in which this rehearsal is being enacted, despite it being almost the very opposite of the assembly hall or the head's waiting room in terms of style, function and form. Repeated exposure and experiences within various spaces across and throughout their time at FPS result in a learned disregard of certain surroundings for members of the school community: staff, students and parents

alike. In this case the event is casual as reflected in the treatment of the space and vice versa. Thus, as sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron⁸ help us to see, members of the school community are learning to intuitively behave in certain ways in certain physical spaces.

Interactions between students similarly dictate the use of space more generally during break and lunchtimes at the school where staff have been encouraged to use the pastoral budget to provide activities to promote social connections between the boys during their free time. At lunchtime the boys might be found comfortably sprawled across the desks and chairs in their form rooms, with a group on one side of the room playing cards and a group on the other huddled around a mini pool table cheering loudly at intermittent intervals. It is during these moments that students really relax into the school environment, treating it as they would spaces within their own homes. The small classroom next to the office in which I worked acts as a clear example of a backstage space, with students sitting in the room prior to an important coursework deadline, some at computers, others with chairs pulled up to the table in the centre. Headphones adorn ears and they are dressed casually, with one sixth-form boy in a shockingly bright tie-dye T-shirt. 'I like your T-shirt,' I say to him jokingly as I walk into the room to collect some photocopying. 'No, you definitely don't,' he laughs, sat amid empty packets of crisps and cans of soft drink which are littered around the room. Surprisingly, they are all still in the room at the end of the day, fighting over access to the printer but still seemingly enjoying themselves. 'I thought they would all be gone by midday,' says the head of department to me, wearily. It is during these moments that students really relax into the school environment, treating it, as numerous participants in this research told me, as a 'home away from home'. Students move seamlessly between the different spaces, taking little to no notice of the grandeur of the assembly hall, and in turn taking little to no notice of the nature of the classrooms and offices in which they carry out their schoolwork, print their coursework or have meetings with their teachers.

In my interviews with alumni, it became increasingly clear how significant the experience of moving through elite spaces, first at FPS and then beyond, was in shaping students' sense of belonging. I interviewed one of my ex-students, Alex, a serious and determined young man, not long after he had started his undergraduate degree at Cambridge. 'I don't feel at all intimidated by the university,' he told me, 'but I would fully understand how one can feel very easily intimidated by it.' 'At school,' he continued, 'and even before that, at my prep,⁹ when people got bursaries,¹⁰ obviously they were never published. You didn't tell people you'd got a bursary. But people guessed in ten seconds. You know . . . there are people here whose parents went to FPS and grandparents went to FPS, and whose parent's name is on some school trophy . . . and who know what the grand hall is. You can tell who is primed at home.¹¹ Not primed in an unpleasant way . . . but this stuff is just more familiar.'

This idea of familiarity came up repeatedly, not only in one-to-one interviews with alumni but also in informal conversations and even in a focus group I held with a group of the youngest students in the senior school, all in Year 7 (aged 11–12). These students, many of whom had attended the linked junior school, had already spent time in the senior school's grand spaces:

EMMA (E): Had you been up here before?

ANTHONY (A): Yes.

FRANCIS: A couple of times . . . We only know . . . We only knew the grand hall, because that's where we did all of the concerts.

E: Do you think it helped you having been up here before?

A: Yes.

E: How?

ROBERT: Because you could . . . You . . . I kind of could envision, like, how things would move around, how long it might take to . . . like, the scale of things, yes, some kind of scale of things.

Robert's point about envisioning the space and 'how things would move around' was a powerful observation. He was able to visualise what the space would look like before starting at the school, enabling a sense of comfort that would otherwise not be present. Similarly, Otto, a Year 11 student (aged 15–16), reflected on this same sense of familiarity when I interviewed him one lunchtime. We were talking about the move from junior to senior school and how it felt socially. 'You've got all the same people with you,' he told me, 'but they do have a lot of (new) people that come in in Year 7, so it's very different. But immediately, you feel kind of more like an adult. Because you're in a very important hall . . .' These conversations demonstrated how often these young people described this experience of moving between spaces, physical and social, that might otherwise have been intimidating. Students at FPS learn early on to feel comfortable and relaxed across and within different types of spaces, whether grand or functional.

Notably, I also recognise the impact on my own trajectory after having spent nearly a decade working at FPS. The reflections provided by my students apply to me just as much as they do to them, in the sense that I would move throughout the vast and impressive space of the grand hall without taking even a second to acknowledge the grandeur of the space in which I found myself. Over time I started to carry this embodied sense of comfort with me as I went about my day at the school, attending assembly in the hall with its polished parquet floor, teaching in the classrooms and eating my lunch in the wood-panelled dining hall. Finding myself in the LSE's Shaw Library a few years later with its similarly imposing architecture and framed portraits of important men in LSE's history, I felt a sense of recognition that would not have been there had I not been familiar with similar environments from my time at FPS. Geographer Akile Ahmet¹² shows in her work how spaces calibrated to maintain a sense of white supremacy at elite universities have been shown to make students feel out of place. My time and experience at FPS had calibrated me to feel a sense of comfort when finding myself in these kinds of spaces, to the extent that I

went on to spend seven years studying for a doctorate at LSE and feeling very much at home throughout the process.

We can therefore see the extent to which this aforementioned sense of familiarity with certain spaces—whether at the transition from junior to senior school, from senior school to university or, as in my own case, from teaching in a private school to working within an elite university—enables what is often described as a sense of so-called confidence within formal environments that might otherwise feel alien or intimidating. This is cultivated through a series of often subtle, repeated encounters with particular norms and aesthetics that gradually become internalised. Over time, students who are repeatedly exposed to such environments come to treat them not as exceptional, but as normal, or as spaces in which they intuitively belong and can navigate as a kind of ‘home away from home’. In short, repeated exposure to specific experiences within a setting is key to the acquisition of what Pierre Bourdieu would term ‘practical reason’¹³ or a deeply embedded, taken-for-granted understanding of how to act within a certain environment, leading to a degree of comfort within particular social or physical contexts that others, without such exposure, may struggle to acquire.

Ritual and school life

Morning assemblies symbolise a point in the day at which almost the entirety of the school community comes together. This happens on a weekly basis throughout the school year,¹⁴ with particular emphasis on assemblies taking place at the end of term, where the ritual¹⁵ will be punctuated with prize-giving and musical interludes. Over 1000 students, ranging in age from 11–18, enter the hall in dribs and drabs, seated in their form groups and according to their ‘house’.¹⁶ Wooden chairs are laid out in six separate sections across the newly sanded parquet flooring facing the stage and a lone lectern. The students sit according to their age, with the younger years sat closest to the front and the oldest at the back,

the furthest away from the action. Staff stand and line the back walls of the hall, clutching papers, iPads and coffee cups, the most coveted spot to stand being next to the staff room door so that you can duck in to carry out inevitable last-minute photocopying or refill your cup of tea or coffee.

The order of service of assemblies at FPS appears to be highly regimented. The seating is nearly always arranged in the same way, facing towards a lone lectern atop a podium. On occasion a screen will be set up at the front of the hall, should the student or member of staff taking the assembly require audio-visual support. The head boy or girl¹⁷ will approach the lectern and stand in silence, signifying that the students should stop talking and assembly is about to start. As hush falls, the student seated closest to the school office will open the door to allow the headteacher (wearing an academic gown) to enter the assembly hall and stride purposefully over to join the head boy or girl at the lectern. The students and staff are expected to mark his appearance by standing up and so his walk across the hall is accompanied by the cacophony of chair legs being dragged across the floor, and the same again as the students sit down before announcements start.

The announcement process at FPS tends to mark the beginning of each assembly, unless time constraints dictate that this is impossible. Students and teachers line up on one side of the lectern waiting to take to the podium to inform students about the latest activity/club/charitable event taking place in school that week. The announcements are structured at random and generally take place in the order in which individuals arrive in the queue; there is no identifiable hierarchy to the ritual of announcement proceedings. If anything, this stage of the assembly tends to be dominated by students rather than teachers, and students from across all age ranges as well as across genders. Once all notices have been given, which can often take a significant chunk of time, the microphone is handed over to whomever has volunteered to take the assembly for that day, ordinarily a member of staff, or a representative from a charity the students have decided to support for that year's charitable term.

On the surface, this could be deemed a regimented and ritualised series of events. However, look closer and you start to identify patterns of behaviour that circumvent the expectation of formality presented by what Erving Goffman¹⁸ might term the ‘frontstage’ performance of the ritual of assembly. Sixth-form boys and girls lounge in their chairs, as if on the sofa at home, somewhat scruffy and hair unkempt, phones in hand and glanced at under cover of a scuffed sweatshirt sleeve. Students get up from their seats to accept accolades for academic or sporting achievements blazer-less, shirts untucked. On one occasion, I am talking to a colleague just outside the hall as the assembly starts when two boys attempt to enter the double doors. My colleague accosts them with an ‘ahem, bit late aren’t you?’ ‘Fashionably, sir,’ one of them replies, pushing his floppy hair back behind his ear as he saunters into the room.

Perhaps surprisingly, subversions of the formal ritual of assembly are also carried out overtly and purposely by the staff and even the head of the school. Each year FPS has a themed ‘mufti’ day, where students and staff can come in to school wearing their own clothes in exchange for giving money to a cause chosen by the students. And each year the head of the school attempts to surpass expectations set by his costume the previous year. One year, he dressed up in a full Spider-Man costume and proceeded to abseil (in front of a shell-shocked audience) down the side of the assembly hall, from the mezzanine to the ground. The following year saw his incarnation as Harry Potter, complete with live music and a wand. Most recently the senior management team dressed up and performed as characters from a pantomime written and directed by the school’s director-in-residence. The script was a parody of the quirks of the school and made much of the so-called rivalry between FPS and another school, but the highlight was when the headteacher popped up dressed as a genie, ready and waiting to grant the wishes of the main character of the performance played by the head boy. Events such as this are at the extreme end of public subversions of formal events by members of the school community; there is almost always an edge to every ritualised school

gathering that might well go undetected by the casual observer, but ultimately that edge slowly and carefully chips away at the veneer of elite school finery that the school presents as its formal 'frontstage' institutional persona.

There are exceptions to the above, where the set choreography is followed without subversion. A clear example of this would be prize-giving evenings or once yearly 'client-facing' assemblies, following the same format as a daily assembly but where outside members of the school community are invited in, such as parents, school governors and special guest speakers, generally alumni of the school, now in the public eye, or a famous parent with a child in the school. In this case the school lives up to expectations. The event is painstakingly choreographed or 'expressively accentuated'¹⁹ with all students receiving prizes allocated seating appropriate to when they will need to get up to receive their award. The senior management team and guest sit on grand chairs on the podium, flanked by huge vases of flowers and piles of books acting as prizes, the order of events follows the same series of formalised steps that old school photographs demonstrate have been followed for decades.

Open evenings at the school follow a similar format. These take place at the beginning of the school year and provide an opportunity for the school to sell itself to prospective new families. Current students are recruited to provide personal tours, and parents are presented with the school at its very best; classrooms are tidied and the correct uniform is insisted upon. Heads of department are on hand after a talk by a member of the senior management team, and prospective students and parents are provided with another opportunity to network with and ask questions of members of staff in senior and middle management positions. It is important to note, however, that the tour itinerary rarely includes a visit to the annexe of the school. Instead, the prospective parents and students are taken to visit the 'frontstage' parts of FPS deemed as most acceptable for the eyes of potential new families (and the nature of the annexe does not meet the appropriate standard of

acceptability). Despite not being officially out of bounds, students take the initiative and tend to avoid this section of the school when advertising it to families. It becomes the case that those involved in these types of ritualised events (and almost all students will be at some point in their school career) become attuned to the needs of the different groups of people attending that particular event, and so able to interpret when and to whom to present a specific persona or way of being.

It therefore emerges that the students are learning when it is permissible for the ‘backstage’ performance to emerge. This is modelled via their behaviour in the assembly hall where there is often an undercoat of minor transgression, manifested as uniform infringements or, at times, low-level disruptive behaviour in the form of deliberate misbehaviour which is tolerated without significant repercussions.²⁰ The rituals outlined above are all performed in a set way; they are formalised, symbolic and historic performances that are enacted in specific spaces and architectural stages across the school site, but this formal performance, when there is no outside audience to impress, has become fused with informality and we are left with rituals where it is exactly this fusion of concurrent multiple performances that becomes the norm. Consequently, it is not just the act of the ritual itself, but the nature of the ritual that is key to understanding how the students develop such valuable forms of embodied cultural capital. Within these ‘performances’, there are complex layers of both formality and informality taking place. And it is precisely through learning to navigate these kinds of ritualised events and developing a way of knowing²¹ when and in what circumstances subversion is deemed appropriate, that the students are given the opportunity to learn to navigate the ambiguous, often contradictory nature of institutions and organisations. It cultivates what I describe in this book as a distinctive sense of *audacity*, or a readiness to test boundaries and challenge norms, that may help them to flourish in later life when they find themselves in similar spatial or ritualised circumstances.²²

‘Untuck your shirt’: Uniform, rules and rebellion

Paul, at the time of writing a post-graduate student at UCL, sits in front of me in the cafe where we are having our interview. ‘On the first day, it was Elliot actually, literally on my first day, so the orientation day in Year 9 (aged 13–14), I arrived in my school uniform and Elliot untucked my shirt for me,’ he says. ‘Did he?’ I reply, laughing and picturing this scene in my head, having taught both boys during my time at the school. ‘Literally, it was an hour in, I was standing outside the old lecture theatre near the music block and Elliot was like, what are you doing? I was quite small as well so my shirts were quite long, so it was like a blouse.’ Paul and I laugh again at this image, so representative of both of our experiences at the school where the FPS attitude towards its distinctive uniform could almost certainly be described as relaxed. Official school publications, prize-giving events and open evenings would have readers and visitors to the school assume that students are impeccably dressed at all times, with shirts tucked in and top buttons done up, blazers on at all times between lessons and during ritual gatherings. However, as Paul goes on to describe, this is not how the FPS boys present themselves as they make their way to school, and it differed quite substantially from his experiences at his former school:

Yes. This is so strange, I always thought. Because we used to live in Fortune Park so to drive to my prep school in the morning meant driving down Fortune Park Crescent and we used to laugh at FPS boys looking like a bit of a mess. I think the biggest change, ironically, considering how ritualised in its own ways FPS is, Weststreet [Paul’s former school] was very disciplined. Not in an unpleasant way, but it was very much taken that everyone had their shirt tucked in and everyone sung hymns every morning and everyone did their homework. It was very rigorous . . . So I’d say of all the adjustments, the biggest was a kind of lack of formality I guess, for want of a better word.

Which I did miss actually, it was quite a big adjustment. Even things like, the first few weeks, still to this day at Weststreet, when a teacher came into the classroom you stood up. At FPS you don't even notice when another teacher entered the room.

In the same way that the grand assembly hall of the school does not represent the nature of the school's physical spaces in their entirety, the ideal of neatly dressed students presented by the school through official publications and open evenings could not be further from the reality—a cursory glance through the window of a typical classroom would highlight numerous different uniform contraventions, including blazers forgotten and shirts untucked. This holds true to the point where students are proud of this particular element of the school's identity and a fellow student will untuck his peer's shirt to ensure he doesn't get ridiculed by the school community (as in Paul's case above). This attitude to uniform, despite the glossy brochures demonstrating otherwise, is rooted in the school's history and institutional identity. In discussions with my relatives who attended the school themselves and who have sent their own sons to the school, all mention the individual style of the students as being a distinctive feature of the FPS 'brand'. The outward subversion of uniform expectations is prized by the students and parents, to the extent that parents send their children to the school precisely for this reason among others. Indeed, Paul relished telling me the story of how his parents used to drive past FPS when he attended a different prep school up the road and laugh at how scruffily the students were dressed, only to later choose to send him there themselves. The example of uniform is therefore a clear behavioural or performative manifestation of the inherent tension between front and backstage performances highlighted throughout this chapter.

When the current headteacher started to work at the school, he looked to the uniform as a potential avenue through which he could tackle the perception of FPS students as 'looking like they were a bit of a mess'. There ensued a battle of wills between the

senior management team and the sixth-form students (permitted to wear their own clothes to school), who had been informed via their parents that there was to be a crackdown on students entering the school site unsuitably dressed. A letter sent to all parents one September from the pastoral deputy head stated that 'all pupils need to be dressed neatly and tidily. No tracksuit bottoms, no sports shirts.' Little notice was taken at the time, resulting in a follow-up email being sent to parents later in the school term, instructing that students will be asked to go home and change should they turn up to school in clothing that subverts the uniform rules.

Rather than have the desired effect, the email caused absolute outrage among the sixth-form student population, and specifically a group of boys in my own form group at the time. These boys, most of whom could pass for being in their early twenties, were enraged by what they themselves described to me one morning as an 'attack on their civil liberties, miss'. At the same time as preparing for the rigorous Oxbridge²³ application process (seven out of the nine boys in my form group applied) they organised for a large group of students to come into school the next day wearing track-suit bottoms, in an attempt to protest against what they perceived to be a rising tide of discipline, an intervention that to them contravened the very essence of what they believed made the school what it is. In this case, the boys in my form demonstrated how some students learn to navigate the system to such an extent that they not only feel confident breaking the rules, but also possess the *audacity* to orchestrate a full-scale rebellion against what they perceived as an unfair crackdown on their freedom to dress as they pleased. This episode serves as a striking example of the consequences of being schooled within a context of flexible rules and blurred boundaries between formality and informality. Some students come to embody a form of cultural capital marked by a boldness or learned *audacity* to challenge authority, recognising where and when lines can be bent or crossed to exercise some of their own power.

These opportunities could be identified as being inherently tied up with a certain performance of hegemonic masculinity²⁴ or a

dominant form of masculinity that goes hand in hand with that of the elite environment in which these students find themselves. FPS has been a boys' school for the majority of its existence, only admitting girls in the final two years of the school relatively recently. This has created an environment which has been made and remade through a series of gendered relations, where men remain present and dominant in the social space both in terms of their presence as bodies around the school and in the images and lists of students on display in the canteen and in other ceremonial spaces around the school site. And, when girls started to enter the sixth form these gendered relations became all the more visible, as the boys navigate a series of new social relations and the need to perform in a certain way in relation to the girls. A discussion with a politics teacher during the height of the #metoo²⁵ movement at the school highlights the difficulties of the girls wishing to identify as feminist within a historically male or masculine space, where men and boys remain dominant:

Quite a few of the boys in the class expressed a feeling of we're being attacked or it's gone too far the other way which a few of the girls argued down . . . but then themselves at other points have kind of been like because of their age there's this idea of the **right kind of feminism** and not being too angry or too vocal is key within that to remain attractive to your peers . . . so they have to balance completely wanting to be feminist and being attractive and desirable which is an impossible tightrope

The boys in my form were therefore operating within a space in which a series of gendered relations resulted in the performance of a form of masculinity which remained dominant throughout my time at FPS, where the ability to stand up to authority enabled them to 'win' the battle in relation to the uniform rules. And, despite the fact that no tracksuits or jogging bottoms continued to be a school rule, sixth formers (both boys and girls) regularly

turned up in such items of clothing, in direct contravention of the rules. Disciplining students according to uniform contraventions was very much not a priority for teachers, and years of historical inertia resulted in a culture that, without the backing of the entire school community, was unlikely to ever change. Indeed, not long after I left the school the head of sixth form retired after a number of years in post. The newly appointed head of sixth form immediately got rid of the uniform rules, and now sixth-form students are permitted to wear pretty much whatever they want to school (with very few restrictions). As such, the battle for compliance with uniform rules has been lost (or won in the eyes of the students), to the extent that the rules have since been changed to reflect what had always been happening. In this instance, the rules were bent so many times that the bent rules became the rules.

The tracksuit example is a prism through which to view the general attitude towards uniform at the school. It is a key identifying factor of the culture of FPS, a way in which the students outwardly perform their belonging—a spectrum of untucked shirts and forgotten ties all the way through to the tracksuit bottoms and oversized sweatshirts characteristic of sixth-form students, both for the boys and girls. A conversation with a member of the senior management team a few years after the initial tracksuit crackdown revealed that they no longer saw uniform as a key priority, and in fact he went so far as to acknowledge that the relaxed approach to dress was one of the very reasons why some parents choose to send their children to FPS. He drew attention to the fact that often there will be a group of parents who will be very casually dressed for school events, referring specifically to the Year 7 parents' evening that had taken place the night before our conversation. A number of the parents had turned up to the event in the summer term in flip-flops, often straight from work, where the nature of their profession may not require them to wear a suit. Therefore, to a certain extent, the attitude of the students towards uniform reflects and reinforces that of the parent body; what hope is there to enforce such rules when the very root of that rule

is embedded within the client base of those who send their children to the school (and may well have attended the school themselves)?

There is a further axis of potential subversion of the ‘frontstage’ ideal that can be identified here: the fact that a vast majority of the staff body do not uphold the expected dress code. Saul, one of the peer researchers I engaged to help facilitate focus groups with sixth-form students on behalf of the research for this book, made the astute observation that teachers at the school do not as a whole tend to dress in a way he would consider to be appropriate work attire. Looking down at my black jeans and boots during our conversation, I am struck by the truism of his observation. A glance around the staff tables at lunchtime reveals a multitude of different interpretations of the staff dress code: chinos instead of suit trousers, dark jeans instead of trousers, the occasional pair of trainers. Every year the requisite email will be sent out to staff reminding them of the code, but this is routinely (mostly) ignored, or upheld for a couple of days before staff revert back to the norm. It is no wonder that students demonstrate a similar approach to their own dress code, when this approach is often being reflected back to them via the staff and parent body.

A discussion within a peer-led focus group (facilitated by Saul) between students in Year 13 (aged 17–18) further emphasises the extent to which school uniform plays a role in the ways in which students perceive themselves, each other and the school rules:²⁶

CALLUM (C): Sixth form has no defined uniform.

BEN (B): Right, the sixth form has no uniform but . . .

DYLAN (D): They say no tracksuits but even that . . .

B: Yes.

SAUL (S): But that’s interesting, isn’t it, that they say no tracksuits and yet . . .

D: I’m sure it’s just Mrs Radcliffe.

KAI: For the sake of the recording I’ll say I’m in tracksuits as we speak.

S: Yes, so it's . . . But it is worth noting that people do not pay attention to the rules. They are just not interested. The need for . . .

ORSON (O): I think we are really supposed to bend the rules.

S: It's interesting why we think we can get away with that.

B: Yes.

D: Probably . . .

S: So, if you can say why we . . . So, like . . .

D: We are not encouraged but . . .

C: I think . . .

D: You are not disallowed.

C: I think it's because I noticed the interactions with teachers is so different at FPS than most of the schools. And I think because of that friendlier interaction you then are encouraged to bend the rules because the authority figures are less like . . .

O: Authoritative.

C: Yes, exactly.

D: Yes, I think because of the nature of the school, having, for example, a strict uniform regulation would restrain each person's ability to express themselves how they want to. If some people don't want to, some people just might not want to wear school clothes every day or something like that. And so, they shouldn't be punished for wanting to have their own dress sense or ideas.

What becomes clear here is the tension or flexibility between formality and informality. The students have to navigate and negotiate this boundary, constantly ensuring that they remain on the right side of the line to adequately perform what it means to be an FPS student in different contexts. Kai even goes so far as to state for the recording that he is wearing a tracksuit, explicitly referring to the fact that he has subverted the desired frontstage performance in this instance, and proudly so. This flexible take is backed by Orson, who goes on to say that he thinks the students are really

supposed to bend the rules, thus reinforcing Shamus Khan's observation of the 'distinction between learning rules, which are easy, and learning practices, which are far more challenging, as they require living the relations in question.'²⁷ As such, the school is providing students, and particularly the boys who have been students at the school from an early age and learn to operate within an inherently masculine environment, with the tools through which they can learn to negotiate their way through the institutional procedures and protocols of school life—where a student will go to the lengths of untucking his peer's shirt to fit with common institutional practice.

The fragile boundary between front and backstage is constantly being tested by members of the FPS school community. The architecture or built environment within which the daily life of the school takes place displays a clear manifestation of this tension from the outset, as the grand event spaces of the school are juxtaposed with the opposing nature of the classrooms and staff offices. Parallels can be drawn here with other elite spaces, such as the more extreme example of the Houses of Parliament, where 'away from the grand chambers of the House of Commons and House of Lords . . . the palace is tatty (and) dirty'²⁸—a world in which most visitors are exposed only to the frontstage grandeur, shielded from the neglected backstage spaces. At FPS, however, the repeated experience of navigating their way through these contrasting environments becomes both normal and normalised. The students (and teachers, myself included) move through these differing spaces with ease or, perhaps more accurately, with what I would call a kind of *audacity*, treating all areas, whether intended for spectacle or function, with the same casual familiarity, as if they were in their own homes. This audacious approach to space, a learned boldness in crossing formal boundaries without hesitation, quietly prepares students for similar elite environments of power and privilege beyond school, environments where knowing how to inhabit both grand public stages and hidden backrooms is key to belonging and influence.

As such, the students learn to play the 'rules of the game'²⁹ within an environment where a form of enduring masculinity is dominant. They are exposed to situations that at times encourage them to resist the rules, through their interactions with teachers, parents and their peers, but it is this very resistance that constitutes a particular way of being in the world. Here operates a similar paradox to that identified by the sociologist Paul Willis³⁰ in that the students at Fortune Park School are actively rebelling or resisting a supposed system, but in this case end up doing so in such a way as to produce their own privilege. Subverting the rules becomes a behavioural manifestation of the school community's relationship to space and to ritual, to the extent that this becomes what is expected, even ritualised itself. It is through these processes that a flexible approach to the making and breaking of rules contributes towards the formation of a valuable form of emerging cultural capital, tightly bound to a valued form of embodied masculinity. Central to this is a learned way of being characterised by the pushing of boundaries and knowing how far such resistance can go without consequence. This becomes a resource for navigating school rules, spatial dynamics and ritual practices, embedding itself as a means through which privilege is produced and reproduced within the walls of FPS.

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