

Current Issues in Stratification in the UK

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1 The ‘Class Debate’ of the early 1990s

From the early 1990s and before there has been a sustained attack on the concept of social class in the UK and elsewhere, largely making the point that it carries a lot of Marxist and historicist baggage, and is demonstrably irrelevant to the analysis of contemporary industrial society (Hindess, 1987; Turner, 1989; Sørensen, 1991). For instance, in 1989, Ray Pahl asked ‘is the emperor naked?’, more recently Pakulski and Waters (1996) have announced ‘The Death of Class’. Class conflict, and class identity, they argue, are notable by their weakness, and other factors, such as gender, race, or lifestyle, offer greater explanatory power.

In a response to these arguments, Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) announced a ‘promising future’ for class analysis, and argued that on the one hand the more justified criticisms of class analysis were better to be understood as criticisms of particular substantive theories of class, especially Marxist ones, and on the other that a stripped-down, highly analytical concept of social class offered substantial potential as the base of a programme of analysis.

2 The onward march of class theorists

Both sides have come out of the ‘Class Debate’ with refined but fundamentally unchanged arguments. Goldthorpe continues to work with his schema and the logic underlying it, and Marshall has recently published a book called ‘Repositioning Class’ (1997), which makes, and attempts to demonstrate, the claim that class analysis is as useful and effective as it ever has been.

However, it is certainly the case that class analysis has become less fashionable, which is a real problem for researchers based in universities, as fewer students are choosing courses on social class and stratification.

Among recent work, one approach that is particularly interesting, though more theoretically than empirically oriented is represented by John Scott’s recent book, ‘Stratification and Power’ (1996). Scott, like Goldthorpe, Marshall and a lot of other British class analysts, is strongly influenced by Weber, and the message of this book is that Weber’s well-known (and, as Scott points out,

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universally misinterpreted) triad of class, status and party (or class, status and power, depending on the interpretation and translation) can be used as a coordinating framework for stratification research. His innovation is to argue that Weber's position was least well developed on the third element, party, and Scott proposes a new concept to make good this imbalance: command, thus 'class, status and command'. That is, by drawing on the work of writers such as Pareto and Mosca he proposes a theory of social power deriving from bureaucratic and institutional positions of authority, which directly complements his treatment of (i) social power arising from class positions (where he supplements Weber's analysis by going back to Marx) and (ii) social power arising from status position (here Scott draws extensively from Parsons to extend Weber's treatment of status). The result is a theoretical position from which to treat stratification in modern societies at a fairly sophisticated level, recognising both the importance of class and its limits: modern societies are ever more exposed to economic, calculative rationality and therefore the direct influence of class location on life-chances becomes ever greater, but at the same time association and status are important, while bureaucratic structures become ever more important (at the macro level we have more and more supra-national bureaucracy, while at the micro level information technology is giving ever more ability to monitor).

Scott's work is essentially theoretical, but is open to empirical issues: a group of us at Essex are meeting regularly to bring together the quantitative empirical focus of the Research Centre on Micro-social Change, with the theoretical expertise of sociologists such as Scott and Lockwood in the Department of Sociology, in order to develop a programme of research.

3 Assessing social classifications: The Goldthorpe Scheme and the ONS Review

Another important direction of development in stratification research is a growing focus on the operationalisation of social class. What does it measure, and why, and does it do its job well?

This involves two related strands of research: on the one hand Goldthorpe and others are looking at his class scheme and how it operates, and on the other the Office of National Statistics is funding a substantial programme to develop a new social class classification for official use, a programme which is being driven by sociologists.

3.1 The ONS Review

There are two main official social classification systems in the UK, the 'Registrar General's Social Class' scheme, or RGSC, which was first developed around the turn of the century, and whose conceptual basis is not clear, and 'Socio-Economic Group' (SEG) developed by David Glass in the 1950s, which is clearly more sociologically useful, and in some ways weakly reminiscent of the Goldthorpe scheme, though nonetheless without a clear conceptual basis. In 1994 the UK Government (through the Office of National Statistics and the Economic and Social Research Council) initiated a review of social classification with a view to developing an official scheme (in time for the 2001 census) which had a clearer theoretical rationale. The process has involved a great deal of discussion between social scientists, government statisticians and academic and non-academic users of the data, and is now at an advanced stage. Rose and

O'Reilly, who are coordinating the review, have just published a book which outlines the state of the process so far, and presents the current version of the classification scheme. At the risk of gross simplification, this strongly resembles, and is indeed derived from, the Goldthorpe scheme, but within the considerable constraint of a relatively high level of backward compatibility with SEG.

In research carried out as part of this process, it has been found, *inter alia*, that the interim version of the new classification functions well in grouping occupations (according to its mechanical rules based on occupational description and employment status) that are similar in the characteristics in terms of which the conceptual foundation operates. That is, the basis of the scheme is that it replicates real differences in the social class location of the people it classifies, where aspects of the class location that are considered theoretically important, but are not measured, include things like control over time and task at work, forms of remuneration, security, long-term promotional prospects and so on. Especially in measures related to the features defining, in Goldthorpe's terms, the service class, the interim classification functions well (as does Goldthorpe's scheme, naturally).

3.2 Goldthorpe and colleagues on the class scheme

The research for the ONS programme is closely related to work that has been going on for a longer time on the Goldthorpe scheme (*e.g.*, Evans, 1992; Evans and Mills, 1998), which has been focussing on whether the operationalisation of the class scheme measures what it is intended to measure (*i.e.*, its 'criterion' validity), and other work which examines the extent to which it can explain other outcomes, such as health, political affiliation (some of which is reported in Rose and O'Reilly (1997); this is its 'construct' validity).

Goldthorpe has been focussing on more theoretical implications of his scheme, notably on the case of class differentials in education. In a paper in 1996 he points out that class differentials in education have remained extremely stable in the UK and elsewhere, in the face of substantial growth in participation by all classes, and despite a changing class distribution. This is all the more remarkable for the dramatic change that has taken place in the relative educational attainment of women. He then goes on to propose that this is to be explained in terms of rational responses to the different class situations, notably that different class locations have different resources to invest in education, and in particular that people from less advantaged classes will suffer more badly if their investment in education does not work out. In collaboration with Richard Breen, now Professor of Sociology in Florence (EUI), he expresses this theory in more formal terms (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997).

In more recent work he turns to criterion validity issues raised by the ONS review and by Evans and Mills: the class scheme is conceptualised in terms of employment relations, but operationalised simply in terms of occupation and employment status, but in practice it successfully groups people with different forms of employment contract. In an unpublished paper (Goldthorpe, 1997) he deals with the problem of why this differentiation should occur, and whether it should be regarded a stable feature of the class landscape. That is, why should there be at one extreme the 'service contract' with high autonomy, security and long-term prospects, and at the other the labour contract characterised by highly supervised short-term exchanges of labour for cash.

In an interesting work, which draws on economics (with some reservations)

and in particular the economics of personnel, he finds two important dimensions underlie the distribution of types of contract and their association with class categories. First there is the difficulty of monitoring work: where work is easily monitored with respect to quantity and quality it becomes easy to operate contracts which directly relate reward to output; where it is difficult autonomy must of default be given to the worker. The second dimension is the specificity of the human assets, that is, how easy it is for the employer to replace a given worker (does the worker have a general skill that is rare, or has he acquired valuable firm specific skills?). Where the specificity of assets is high, the employer has an incentive to ensure the worker stays with the firm, where it is low he or she will be much less willing to invest in workers. For typical service class occupations both these dimensions tend to be high: such occupations often involve very specific skills acquired over a long period, and involve work that is hard to monitor in the short term. For unskilled labour both dimensions tend to be low: the work is easily quantified, and the workers are easily replaced. This gives us the two extremes and most occupations fall between them, with specificity of assets and difficulty of monitoring tending to co-vary. However, the supervisory manual class, and class IIIa (higher grade routine non-manual) are not on this diagonal: supervisors are relatively easily supervised (they ‘clock on’ *etc.*) but they have built up relatively high levels of skills, often firm-specific. In contrast, higher grade routine non-manual workers are easily replaced in that their skills are not very specific or rare, but their work is often harder to monitor than that of a factory worker. Thus these categories tend to have the pure form of neither the labour contract nor the service contract, but something in between.

4 Change in employment conditions?

Newer anxieties about stratification and class analysis revolve around suspicions that the social division of labour, the social technology that relates people to the structures of production, is changing in radical ways, especially but not only in respect of salariat type jobs. In recent years there has been a lot of talk – in the mass media and among management ‘gurus’ – of ‘flexibility’, new forms of contract, ‘delaying’, and the end of the ‘job for life’. Much of this is just fashionable talk, and some is undoubtedly just the current terminology for cyclical retrenchment in the face of poor economic growth, but there is nonetheless some real change in employment conditions. Some of this is novel because, belatedly, technology is causing redundancies in white collar occupations previously thought secure, and allowing new forms of control where it was impractical before. There is also a significant growth in self-employment, including among people previously employed in professional and managerial jobs.

Some assert that this is the start of a profound change in employment relations (that the security of Goldthorpe’s service relationship no longer exists, for instance), such that conventional concepts of employment based class are no longer useful. More sceptical voices among them point out that the empirical evidence for such change is lacking (for instance, the ONS review has tended to reinforce conventional views of employment conditions).

However, as researchers are quite aware, since most of them are on fixed-term contracts, there is some real change going on, and it is necessary to analyse it.

4.1 Human capital versus Class

One new approach to analysis that avoids the question of class altogether, developing a competing perspective, is that of Jay Gershuny. He exploits longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey¹, and revolves around a human-capital like concept, of economically relevant individual characteristics which both accumulate and decay. These include things like specific qualifications, social networks, work-experience and so on. In predictive terms this is very effective, but it requires extensive longitudinal data. As a perspective it is explicitly micro-sociological and avoids *a priori* macro-level concepts such as class (this may be regarded as an advantage or a disadvantage!).

4.2 Using the BHPS for a longitudinal view on class

I have also been using BHPS longitudinal data to deal with issues of long term change, in particular with respect to the service class. Over the middle of this century it has grown dramatically: is there evidence that its consequences for life chances have changed?

This is a relatively difficult question to answer with retrospective longitudinal data for a number of reasons, but I have framed it in terms of how well being in the service class at age 25 predicts status at age 35, and looked for change in this relationship across cohorts. This is a very narrow way of looking at it but it does have certain advantages for this sort of data: first, it allows fair comparison between cohorts, and second it avoids some of the problems of recall bias, especially those that would affect hazard-rate modelling, but depending only on two relatively well separated observation time-points. Very briefly, loglinear modelling of this data shows a growing level of mobility, including mobility out of the salariat (into either other classes, or in a separate analysis, to non-salariat employment, unemployment and non-employment). However, it is not immediately possible to conclude that the nature of the salariat has changed: several explanations are possible:

- recall bias: perhaps the older cohorts are more likely to wrongly report their statuses, mistakenly claiming to be in the same state at both times
- compositional effect: the distribution of types of job in the salariat may be changing;
- age-pattern changes: with increasing levels of education it may well be that older cohorts are more advanced in their careers by age 25 and therefore the comparison across cohorts is invalid; or
- the salariat is really less secure.

5 Conclusion

This has been a very brief and superficial review of current trends in stratification research in the UK: much that is going on has been ignored for reasons of space. However, it is clear that there is a strong interest in social class measures, both at the level of official statistics and among academics, though academics are not in agreement about whether class is the best way to carry out stratification research.

¹This is an annual panel survey of about 5,500 households, or between 9,000 and 10,000 individuals, and began collecting data in 1991. The annual information is supplemented by retrospective work-life histories covering respondents' entire work lives since first leaving full-time education. It is carried out by the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-social Change, Essex.

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