Chapter 2

Social stratification

Introduction

Egalitarianism

People have long dreamed of an egalitarian society, a society in which all members are equal. In such a society people will no longer be ranked in terms of prestige: no one will experience the satisfaction of occupying a high social status; no one will suffer the indignity of being put in a position that commands little respect. No longer will high status provoke deference and admiration or envy and resentment from those in less 'worthy' positions. Wealth will be distributed equally among the population: the rich and poor, haves and have-nots will be a thing of the past. Words such as 'privilege' and 'poverty' will either change their meaning or disappear from the vocabulary.

In an egalitarian society, the phrase 'power to the people' will become a reality. There will be an end to some people having power over others: positions of authority and the obedience they command will disappear. Exploitation and oppression will be concepts of history which have no place in the description of contemporary social reality. People will be equal both in the sight of God and in the eyes of their fellow people.

Clearly the egalitarian society remains a dream. All human societies from the simplest to the most complex have some form of social inequality. In particular, power and prestige are unequally distributed between individuals and social groups and in many societies there are also marked differences in the distribution of wealth.

1 Power refers to the degree to which individuals or groups can impose their will on others, with or without the consent of those others.

2 Prestige relates to the amount of esteem or honour associated with social positions, qualities of individuals and styles of life.

3 Wealth refers to material possessions defined as valuable in particular societies. It may include land, livestock, buildings, money and many other forms of property owned by individuals or social groups.

In this chapter we are going to study the unequal distribution of power, prestige and wealth in society.

Social inequality and social stratification

It is important at the outset to make a distinction between social inequality and social stratification. The term social inequality simply refers to the existence of socially created inequalities. Social stratification is a particular form of social inequality. It refers to the presence of distinct social groups which are ranked one above the other in terms of factors such as prestige and wealth. Those who belong to a particular group or stratum will have some awareness of common interests and a common identity. They will share a similar lifestyle which, to some degree, will distinguish them from members of other social strata. The Indian caste system provides one example of a social stratification system.

In traditional India, Hindu society was divided into five main strata: four *varnas* or castes, and a fifth group, the outcaste, whose members were known as untouchables. Each caste was subdivided into *jatis* or subcastes, which in total numbered many thousands. *Jatis* were occupational groups – there were carpenter *jatis*, goldsmith *jatis*, potter *jatis*, and so on.

Castes were ranked in terms of ritual purity. The Brahmins, or priests, members of the highest caste, personified purity, sanctity and holiness. They were the source of learning, wisdom and truth. They alone performed the most important religious ceremonies.

At the other extreme, untouchables were defined as unclean, base and impure, a status that affected all their social relationships. They had to perform unclean and degrading tasks such as the disposal of dead animals. They were segregated from members of the caste system and lived on the outskirts of villages or in their own communities. Their presence polluted to the extent that even if the shadow of an untouchable fell across the food of a Brahmin it would render it unclean.

In general, the hierarchy of prestige based on notions of ritual purity was mirrored by the hierarchy of power. The Brahmins were custodians of the law, and the legal system they administered was based largely on their pronouncements. Inequalities of wealth were usually linked to those of prestige and power. In a largely rural economy, the Brahmins tended to be the largest landowners and the control of land was monopolized by members of the two highest castes. Although the caste system has been made illegal in modern India, it still exercises an influence, particularly in rural areas.

As shown by the caste system, social stratification involves a hierarchy of social groups. Members of a particular stratum have a common identity, similar interests and a similar lifestyle. They enjoy or suffer the unequal distribution of rewards in society as members of different social groups.

Social stratification, however, is only one form of social inequality. It is possible for social inequality to exist without social strata. For example, some sociologists have argued that it is no longer correct to regard Western industrial society, particularly the USA, as being stratified in terms of a class system. They suggest that social classes have been replaced by a continuous hierarchy of unequal positions. Where there were once classes, whose members had a consciousness of kind, a common way of life and shared interests, there is now an unbroken continuum of occupational statuses which command varying degrees of prestige and economic reward. Thus it is suggested that a hierarchy of social groups has been replaced by a hierarchy of individuals.

Although many sociologists use the terms social inequality and social stratification interchangeably, the importance of seeing social stratification as a specific form of social inequality will become apparent as this chapter develops.

Strata subcultures

Before looking at some of the major issues raised in the study of social stratification, it is necessary to examine certain aspects of stratification systems. There is a tendency for members of each stratum to develop their own subculture, that is certain norms, attitudes and values which are distinctive to them as a social group. When some members of society experience similar circumstances and problems that are not common to all members, a subculture tends to develop.

For example, it has often been suggested that distinctive working-class and middle-class subcultures exist in Western industrial societies. Similar circumstances and problems often produce similar responses. Members of the lowest stratum in stratification systems that provide little opportunity for improvement of status tend to have a fatalistic attitude towards life. This attitude becomes part of their subculture and is transmitted from generation to generation. It sees circumstances as largely unchangeable; it regards luck and fate rather than individual effort as shaping life, and therefore tends to encourage acceptance of the situation. An attitude of fatalism may be seen in typical phrases from traditional low-income black American subculture such as 'I've been down so long that down don't bother me', 'I was born under a bad sign' and 'It's an uphill climb to the bottom.'

Members of a social group who share similar circumstances and a common subculture are likely to develop a group identity. They tend to have a feeling of kinship with other group members. They will therefore tend to identify with their particular stratum and regard themselves, for example, as middle or working class.

Social mobility

Strata subcultures tend to be particularly distinctive when there is little opportunity to move from one stratum to another. This movement is known as social mobility. Social mobility can be upward, for example moving from the working to the middle class, or downward.

Stratification systems which provide little opportunity for social mobility may be described as closed; those with a relatively high rate of social mobility as open. In closed systems an individual's position is largely ascribed: often it is fixed at birth and there is little he or she can do to change status. Caste provides a good example of a closed stratification system: individuals automatically belonged to the caste of their parents and, except in rare instances, spent the rest of their life in that status.

By comparison, social class, the system of stratification in capitalist industrial society, provides an example of an open system. Some sociologists claim that an individual's class position is largely achieved: it results from their personal qualities and abilities and the use they make of them rather than ascribed characteristics such as the status of their parents or the colour of their skin. By comparison with the caste system, the rate of social mobility in class systems is high.

Life chances

A person's position in a stratification system may have important effects on many areas of life. It may enhance or reduce life chances, that is their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable and avoiding those things defined as undesirable in their society. Gerth and Mills, referring to Western society, state that life chances include:

Everything from the chance to stay alive during the first year after birth to the chance to view fine arts, the chance to remain healthy and grow tall, and if sick to get well again quickly, the chance to avoid becoming a juvenile delinquent and very crucially, the chance to complete an intermediary or higher educational grade

Gerth and Mills, 1954, p. 313

Social versus natural inequalities

Biology and inequality

Many stratification systems are accompanied by beliefs which state that social inequalities are biologically based. Such beliefs are often found in systems of racial stratification where, for example, whites might claim biological superiority over blacks, and see this as the basis for their dominance.

The question of the relationship between biologically based and socially created inequality has proved extremely difficult to answer. The eighteenth-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) provided one of the earliest examinations of this question. He refers to biologically based inequality as: 'natural or physical, because it is established by nature, and consists in a difference of age, health, bodily strength, and the qualities of the mind or the soul'. By comparison, socially created inequality: 'consists of the different privileges which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others, such as that of being more rich, more honoured, more powerful, or even in a position to exact obedience'.

Rousseau believed that biologically based inequalities between people were small and relatively unimportant whereas socially created inequalities provide the major basis for systems of social stratification. Most sociologists would support this view.

However, it could still be argued that biological inequalities, no matter how small, provide the foundation upon which structures of social inequality are built. This position is difficult to defend in the case of certain forms of stratification. In the caste system, an individual's status was fixed by birth. People belonged to their parents' *jati* and automatically followed the occupation of the *jati* into which they were born. Thus, no matter what the biologically based aptitudes and capacities of an untouchable, there was no way he or she could become a Brahmin. Unless it is assumed that superior genes are permanently located in the Brahmin caste (and there is no evidence that this is the case) then there is probably no relationship between genetically based and socially created inequality in traditional Hindu society.

A similar argument can be advanced in connection with the feudal or estate system of medieval Europe. Stratification in the feudal system was based on landholding. The more land an individual controlled, the greater his or her wealth, power and prestige. The position of the dominant stratum, the feudal nobility, was based on large grants of land from the monarch. Their status was hereditary, land and titles being passed on from parent to child. It is difficult to sustain the argument that feudal lords ultimately owed their position to biological superiority when their children, no matter what their biological make-up, inherited the status of their parents.

Natural and cultural inequality

So far we have not answered the question of what exactly constitutes biological inequality. It can be argued that biological differences become biological inequalities when people define them as such. Biological factors assume importance in many stratification systems because of the meanings assigned to them by different cultures. For example, old age has very different meanings in different societies. In traditional aborigine societies in Australia it brought high prestige and power since the elders directed the affairs of the tribe, but in Western societies, the elderly are usually pensioned off, and old age assumes a very different meaning. Even with a change of name to 'senior citizen', the status of old age pensioner commands little power or prestige.

So-called racial characteristics are evaluated on the basis of similar principles, that is values which are relative to time and place. The physical characteristics of blacks in America were traditionally defined as undesirable and associated with a range of negative qualities. However, with the rise of Black Power during the late 1960s, this evaluation was slowly changed with slogans such as 'Black is beautiful.' In South Africa, such negative stereotypes among white South Africans began to be undermined when the apartheid regime, which treated black people as inferior, came to an end in 1992. The widespread respect for the first black leader of the country, Nelson Mandela, made it more difficult for the extreme racism of apartheid to be sustained.

Biological differences form a component of some social stratification systems simply because members of those systems select certain characteristics and evaluate them in a particular way. Differences therefore become inequalities only because they are defined as such. André Béteille argues that the search for a biological basis for social stratification is bound to end in failure since the 'qualities are not just there, so to say, in nature: they are as human beings have defined them, in different societies, in different historical epochs' (Béteille, 1977).

Beliefs which state that systems of social stratification are based on biological inequalities can be seen as rationalizations for those systems. Such

beliefs serve to explain the system to its members: they make social inequality appear rational and reasonable. They therefore justify and legitimate the system by appeals to nature. In this way a social contrivance appears to be founded on the natural order of things.

Inequalities between men and women and between different 'racial' groups are sometimes seen as being based on biological differences. We will discuss sociologists' views of whether this is justified in later chapters. (See Chapter 3 on sex and gender and Chapter 4 on 'race'.)

Having considered social stratification in general terms, we will now look at this subject from the various sociological perspectives.

Social stratification – a functionalist perspective

Functionalist theories of stratification must be seen in the context of functionalist theories of society. When functionalists attempt to explain systems of social stratification, they set their explanations in the framework of larger theories which seek to explain the operation of society as a whole. They assume that society has certain basic needs or functional prerequisites that must be met if it is to survive. They therefore look to social stratification to see how far it meets these functional prerequisites.

Functionalists assume that the parts of society form an integrated whole and thus they examine the ways in which the social stratification system is integrated with other parts of society. They maintain that a certain degree of order and stability is essential for the operation of social systems. They will therefore consider how stratification systems help to maintain order and stability in society. In summary, functionalists are primarily concerned with the function of social stratification: with its contribution to the maintenance and well-being of society.

Talcott Parsons – stratification and values

Like many functionalists, Talcott Parsons believed that order, stability and cooperation in society are based on value consensus – a general agreement by members of society concerning what is good and worthwhile. Parsons argued that stratification systems derive from common values. If values exist, then it follows that individuals will be evaluated and placed in some form of rank order. In Parsons's words, 'stratification, in its valuational aspect, then, is the ranking of units in a social system in accordance with the common value system'. Parsons.

In other words, those who perform successfully in terms of society's values will be ranked highly and they will be likely to receive a variety of rewards. At a minimum they will be accorded high prestige because they exemplify and personify common values.

For example, if a society places a high value on bravery and generosity, as was the case of the Sioux Indians in North America, those who excel in terms of these qualities will receive a high rank in the stratification system. The Sioux warrior who successfully raided the Crow and Pawnee – the traditional enemies of his tribe – captured their horses and distributed them to others, could have received a variety of rewards. He may have been given a seat on the tribal council, a position of power and prestige. His deeds would be recounted in the warrior societies and the women would sing of his exploits. Other warriors would follow him in raids against neighbouring tribes and the success of these expeditions might have led to his appointment as a war chief. In this way, excellence in terms of Sioux values was rewarded by power and prestige.

Because different societies have different value systems, the ways of attaining a high position will vary from society to society. Parsons argued that American society values individual achievement, efficiency and 'puts primary emphasis on productive activity within the economy'. Thus, successful business executives who have achieved their position through their own initiative, ability and ambition, and run efficient and productive businesses, will receive high rewards.

Parsons's argument suggests that stratification is an inevitable part of all human societies. If value consensus is an essential component of all societies, then it follows that some form of stratification will result from the ranking of individuals in terms of common values. It also follows from Parsons's argument that there is a general belief that stratification systems are just, right and proper, because they are basically an expression of shared values. Thus American business executives are seen to deserve their rewards because members of society place a high value on their skills and achievements.

This is not to say that there is no conflict between the haves and have-nots, the highly rewarded and those with little reward. Parsons recognized that in Western

industrial society there will be 'certain tendencies to arrogance on the part of some winners and to resentment and to a "sour grapes" attitude on the part of some losers'. However, he believed that this conflict is kept in check by the common value system which justifies the unequal distribution of rewards.

Organization and planning

Functionalists tend to see the relationship between social groups in society as one of cooperation and interdependence. In complex industrial societies, different groups specialize in particular activities. As no one group is self-sufficient, it alone cannot meet the needs of its members. It must, therefore, exchange goods and services with other groups, and so the relationship between social groups is one of reciprocity (mutual give and take).

This relationship extends to the strata in a stratification system. An oversimplified example is the argument that many occupational groups within the middle class in Western society plan, organize and coordinate the activities of the working class. Each class needs and cooperates with the other, since any large-scale task requires both organization and execution. In societies with a highly specialized division of labour, such as industrial societies, some members will specialize in organization and planning while others will follow their directives. Parsons argued that this inevitably leads to inequality in terms of power and prestige. Referring to Western society:

> *Organization on an ever increasing scale is a fundamental feature of such a system. Such organization naturally involves centralization and differentiation of leadership and authority; so that those who take responsibility for coordinating the actions of many others must have a different status in important respects from those who are essentially in the role of carrying out specifications laid down by others.*
>
> Parsons, 1964, p. 327

Thus those with the power to organize and coordinate the activities of others will have a higher social status than those they direct.

Power

As with prestige differentials, Parsons argued that inequalities of power are based on shared values. Power is legitimate authority in that it is generally accepted as just and proper by members of society as a whole. It is accepted as such because those in positions of authority use their power to pursue collective goals which derive from society's central values. Thus the power of the American business executive is seen as legitimate authority because it is used to further productivity, a goal shared by all members of society. This use of power therefore serves the interests of society as a whole.

Summary and evaluation

Parsons saw social stratification as both inevitable and functional for society.

1 It is inevitable because it derives from shared values which are a necessary part of all social systems.
2 It is functional because it serves to integrate various groups in society.

Power and prestige differentials are essential for the coordination and integration of a specialized division of labour. Without social inequality, Parsons found it difficult to see how members of society could effectively cooperate and work together. Finally, inequalities of power and prestige benefit all members of society since they serve to further collective goals which are based on shared values.

Parsons has been strongly criticized on all these points. Other sociologists have seen stratification as a divisive rather than an integrating force. They have regarded it as an arrangement whereby some gain at the expense of others, and questioned the view that stratification systems derive ultimately from shared values. We will examine these criticisms in detail in later sections.

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore – role allocation and performance

The most famous functionalist theory of stratification was first presented in 1945, in an article by the American sociologists Davis and Moore entitled *Some Principles of Stratification.*

Effective role allocation and performance

Davis and Moore began with the observation that stratification exists in every known human society. They attempted to explain 'in functional terms, the universal necessity which calls forth stratification in any social system'. They argued that all social systems share certain functional prerequisites which must be met if the system is to survive and operate efficiently. One such functional prerequisite is effective role allocation and performance. This means that:

1 all roles must be filled
2 they must be filled by those best able to perform them
3 the necessary training for them must be undertaken
4 the roles must be performed conscientiously.

Davis and Moore argued that all societies need some 'mechanism' for ensuring effective role allocation and performance. This mechanism is social stratification, which they saw as a system that attaches unequal rewards and privileges to the different positions in society.

If the people and positions that make up society did not differ in important respects there would be no need for stratification. However, people differ in terms of their innate ability and talent, and positions differ in terms of their importance for the survival and maintenance of society. Certain positions are more functionally important than others. These require special skills for their effective performance and the number of individuals with the necessary ability to acquire such skills is limited.

A major function of stratification is to match the most able people with the functionally most important positions. It does this by attaching high rewards to those positions. The desire for such rewards motivates people to compete for them, and in theory the most talented will win through. Such positions usually require long periods of training that involve certain sacrifices, such as loss of income. The promise of high rewards is necessary to provide an incentive to encourage people to undergo this training and to compensate them for the sacrifice involved. It is essential for the well-being of society that those who hold the functionally most important positions perform their roles diligently and conscientiously. The high rewards built into these positions provide the necessary inducement and generate the required motivation for such performance. Davis and Moore therefore concluded that social stratification is a 'device by which societies ensure that the most important positions are conscientiously filled by the most qualified persons'.

Functional importance

Davis and Moore realized that one difficulty with their theory was showing clearly which positions are functionally most important. A position may be highly rewarded without necessarily being functionally important. They suggested that the importance of a position can be measured in two ways.

1 It can be measured by the 'degree to which a position is functionally unique, there being no other positions that can perform the same function satisfactorily'. Thus it could be argued that doctors are functionally more important than nurses since their position carries with it many of the skills necessary to perform a nurse's role but not vice versa.

2 The second measure of importance is the 'degree to which other positions are dependent on the one in question'. Thus it may be argued that managers are more important than routine office staff since the latter are dependent on direction and organization from management.

To summarize, Davis and Moore regarded social stratification as a functional necessity for all societies. They saw it as a solution to a problem faced by all social systems, that of 'placing and motivating individuals in the social structure'. They offered no other means of solving this problem and implied that social inequality is an inevitable feature of human society. They concluded that differential rewards are functional for society, because they contribute to the maintenance and well-being of social systems.

Melvin M. Tumin – a critique of Davis and Moore

Davis and Moore's theory provoked a lengthy debate. Melvin Tumin, their most famous opponent, produced a comprehensive criticism of their ideas.

Functional importance

Tumin began by questioning the adequacy of their measurement of the functional importance of positions. Davis and Moore tended to assume that the most highly rewarded positions are indeed the most important. Many occupations, however, which afford little prestige or economic reward, can be seen as vital to society. Tumin therefore argued that 'some labour force of unskilled workmen is as important and as indispensable to the factory as some labour force of engineers'.

In fact, a number of sociologists have argued that there is no objective way of measuring the functional importance of positions. Whether lawyers and doctors are considered as more important than farm labourers and refuse collectors is simply a matter of opinion.

Power and rewards

Tumin argued that Davis and Moore ignored the influence of power on the unequal distribution of rewards. Differences in pay and prestige between occupational groups may be due to differences in their power rather than their functional importance. For example, the difference between the wages of farm labourers and coal miners can be interpreted as a result of the relative bargaining power of the two groups. We will examine this point in detail in later sections.

The pool of talent

Davis and Moore assumed that only a limited number of individuals have the talent to acquire the skills necessary for the functionally most important

positions. Tumin regarded this as a very questionable assumption for three reasons:

1 An effective method of measuring talent and ability has yet to be devised (as the chapter on education in this book indicates).
2 There is no proof that exceptional talents are required for those positions which Davis and Moore considered important.
3 The pool of talent in society may be considerably larger than Davis and Moore assumed (as the chapter on education suggests). As a result, unequal rewards may not be necessary to harness it.

Training

Tumin also questioned the view that the training required for important positions should be regarded as a sacrifice and therefore in need of compensation. He pointed to the rewards of being a student - leisure, freedom and the opportunity for self-development. He noted that any loss of earnings can usually be made up during the first ten years of work. Differential rewards during this period may be justified. However, Tumin saw no reason for continuing this compensation for the rest of an individual's working life.

Motivation

The major function of unequal rewards, according to Davis and Moore, is to motivate talented individuals and allocate them to the functionally most important positions. Tumin rejected this view. He argued that social stratification can, and often does, act as a barrier to the motivation and recruitment of talent.

This is readily apparent in closed systems such as caste and racial stratification: the ascribed status of untouchables prevented even the most talented from becoming Brahmins. Until recently, the ascribed status of blacks in South Africa blocked them from achieving political office and entering highly rewarded occupations. Thus closed stratification systems operate in exactly the opposite way to Davis and Moore's theory.

Tumin suggested, however, that even relatively open systems of stratification erect barriers to the motivation and recruitment of talent. As Chapter 12 on education shows, there is considerable evidence to indicate that the class system in Western industrial society limits the possibilities of the discovery and utilization of talent. In general, the lower an individual's class position, the more likely he or she is to leave school at the minimum leaving age and the less likely to aspire and strive for a highly rewarded position. Thus the motivation to succeed is unequally distributed throughout the class system. As a result, social class can act as an obstacle to the motivation of talent.

In addition, Tumin argued that Davis and Moore failed to consider the possibility that those who occupy highly rewarded positions erect barriers to recruitment. Occupational groups often use their power to restrict access to their positions, so creating a high demand for their services and increasing the rewards they receive.

Tumin used the American Medical Association as an example. By controlling entry into the profession, it has maintained a shortage of doctors and so ensured high rewards for medical services. In this way the self-interested use of power can restrict the recruitment of talented individuals.

Inequality of opportunity

Tumin concluded that stratification, by its very nature, can never adequately perform the functions which Davis and Moore assigned to it. He argued that those born into the lower strata can never have the same opportunities for realizing their talents as those born into the higher strata. Tumin maintained:

> *It is only when there is a genuinely equal access to recruitment and training for all potentially talented persons that differential rewards can conceivably be justified as functional. And stratification systems are apparently inherently antagonistic to the development of such full equality of opportunity.*
>
> Tumin, 1953, in Bendix and Lipset, 1967, p. 55

Social divisions

Finally, Tumin questioned the view that social stratification functions to integrate the social system. He argued that differential rewards can 'encourage hostility, suspicion and distrust among the various segments of a society'. From this viewpoint, stratification is a divisive rather than an integrating force.

Stratification can also weaken social integration by giving members of the lower strata a feeling of being excluded from participation in the larger society. This is particularly apparent in systems of racial stratification. By tending to exclude certain groups from full participation in society, stratification 'serves to distribute loyalty unequally in the population', and therefore reduces the potential for social solidarity.

Tumin concluded that in their enthusiastic search for the positive functions of stratification, functionalists have tended to ignore or play down its many dysfunctions.

The debate between Davis and Moore and Tumin took place in the 1940s and 1950s. Interest in the issues raised by this debate has recently been revived with the development of 'New Right' perspectives in sociology. In the next section we will analyse the New Right theories of social stratification.

Social stratification – a New Right perspective

Introduction

The ideas of the 'New Right' became influential in the 1980s. In politics, they were closely associated with the British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and the American president Ronald Reagan. The American economist Milton Friedman and the Austrian academic Friedrich Hayek contributed much to the development of New Right thinking (see for example Friedman, 1962 and Hayek, 1944). In British sociology, Peter Saunders and David Marsland have been perhaps the most prominent advocates of this perspective. Marsland's views on poverty will be examined in Chapter 5 (pp. 318–19) and Peter Saunders's theory of stratification is discussed below.

The New Right bases its theories on nineteenth-century liberalism. This regarded the free market in capitalist economies as the best basis for organizing society. Market forces encourage competition, which stimulates innovation and efficiency. Businesses have to make products that are cheaper or better than those of their competitors in order to survive. Free market economies are based upon the choices made by individuals when spending their money, selling their labour or purchasing other people's labour. They therefore promote individual liberty.

Like their nineteenth-century liberal counterparts, the New Right sociologists believe that excessive state intervention in the economy must be avoided. The state should not act to redistribute resources and interfere with the workings of the free market. If it tries to do so it will undermine economic efficiency. Inefficient concerns propped up by the government needlessly use up resources. State intervention may take away the motivation for people to work hard. There is little incentive to strive for success if individuals know that the state will help them no matter how little effort they make. Government interference may also create injustice, taking from those who have earned their rewards and giving to those who are undeserving. Furthermore, as the state becomes stronger, the freedom of individuals may be suppressed. For all these reasons the New Right is strongly opposed to Marxism and socialism.

Peter Saunders – stratification and freedom

Saunders (1990) is generally sympathetic to Davis and Moore's theory of stratification: he is certainly much less critical than Melvin Tumin. He points out that even critics like Tumin accepted that all societies have been stratified – there has never been a completely egalitarian society. Furthermore, he suggests that systems which reward different positions unequally can be shown to have beneficial effects, such as motivating people to work hard.

However, Saunders does not argue that unequal rewards are the only way that a society could fill the important positions with capable people. He says that 'it is possible to imagine a society where all positions are rewarded equally in terms of material resources and formal status'. Such a society would have serious problems, however. Some people would not be happy to do the jobs they were allocated and others would not put in the effort needed to do their jobs properly. Saunders believes:

> *In the absence of economic rewards and penalties, the only sanctions available would be those involving the threat or use of physical force. Such people, in other words would have to be jailed, or forcibly set to work in supervised colonies, or even executed as an example to others.*
>
> Saunders, 1990, p. 65

This would be necessary because allowing people to get away with doing less than their fair share of work would undermine the whole system because it would reduce the commitment of others.

Saunders does not therefore accept the functionalist claim that stratification systems based upon economic differences are inevitable. However, he certainly agrees with functionalists that they are desirable. He admits that capitalist societies tend to create more inequality than socialist societies. He also argues that socialist societies are bound to be more repressive than capitalist ones in making people perform their roles. In the absence of adequate economic rewards, force must be used. Saunders even predicts that as countries such as China and the states of the former Soviet Union move towards market-based economies 'state coercion may be expected to decline'.

Equality and justice

In developing his own theory of stratification, Saunders distinguishes three types of equality:

1 Formal or legal equality involves all members of society being subject to the same laws or rules. Individuals are judged according to what they do, for example whether they break the law, and not according to who they are. Sanders sees this type of equality as being an integral part of Western capitalist societies, although he admits that 'in practice it is not always as rigorously applied as it

might be'. Legal equality does not imply that everybody ends up in the same position.

2 The second type of equality, equality of opportunity, means that people have an equal chance to become unequal. Individuals compete for success and those with greater merit achieve more. Merit might involve the ability to work harder or the possession of attributes or characteristics which are valued in a society. A society based on this type of equality is often called a meritocracy.

3 Equality of outcome goes further than the idea of equality of opportunity. Saunders explains:

> *If a meritocracy is like a race where everybody lines up together at the start, a fully-fledged egalitarian society would be like a perfectly handicapped race where everyone passes the finishing tape at the same time no matter how hard and fast they have tried to run.*
>
> Saunders, 1990, p. 44

Broadly, Saunders accepts the principles behind the first two conceptions of equality but rejects the third. Following the ideas of Hayek, he argues that attempts to create equality of outcome undermine equality of opportunity and legal equality. To obtain equality of outcome you have to treat people differently. For example, 'affirmative action' programmes or 'positive discrimination', designed to equalize the achievements of men and women or blacks and whites, result in discrimination. Whites and males are discriminated against while blacks and females enjoy discrimination in their favour.

Saunders uses an example put forward by another New Right writer, Robert Nozick (1974), to show how pursuing equality of outcome leads to injustice. A group of students could agree before an exam that they should all be given a mark of 50 per cent. All would pass and none would have to fear failure, but the result would not be just. Some individuals would feel rightly aggrieved if they were stripped of 30 per cent of the marks they would normally have gained and which they had earned through their own efforts.

Saunders and Nozick therefore adopt a conception of equality based on legal equality and the idea of entitlement. Social justice is served when people are allowed to keep those things to which they are entitled. So long as people have earned the resources or money they possess legally through their own work or 'uncoerced exchanges with others', then there should be no question of them being robbed of their possessions. If people pass their wealth on to others then the recipients become entitled to keep it.

Saunders does, however, admit that there is one flaw in this argument. In a society such as Britain, it is not clear that all of the wealthy are actually entitled to what they own. Some of the land in private hands has been passed down to the descendants of Norman warlords who helped William the Conqueror conquer England. Saunders does not want to see the wealth of landowners such as the Duke of Westminster or the Queen taken from them. To do so would undermine 'the whole basis of modern-day property ownership'. He therefore turns to a second justification for inequality which comes from the work of Hayek.

Both Saunders and Hayek believe that inequality is justified because it promotes economic growth. By allowing and encouraging people to pursue their own self-interest, the interests of society as a whole are promoted. Some entrepreneurs who set up businesses fail. When this happens they bear the costs of their own failure. When they succeed they may, as Saunders says, 'accumulate a fortune, but in doing so they will have added to the productive power and wealth of the society as a whole'.

Competition ensures that goods or services increase in quality and fall in price, making them available to a wider section of the population. Not everyone will be able to afford consumer products initially, or indeed in the end, but living standards will constantly increase. The efforts of entrepreneurs make some of them rich, but at the same time 'the rest of society grows more affluent as it gains by their efforts'.

Saunders cites cars, air travel, ballpoint pens, colour televisions, home computers and central heating as examples of things that have become affordable for ordinary people.

Opportunity and inequality

Saunders clearly believes that competition in capitalist societies benefits the population. In his recent work, he has argued that Britain is close to being a meritocracy (Saunders, 1996). Although he does not claim that Britain or similar societies are perfect meritocracies, in which everyone has genuinely equal opportunities to use their talents to achieve success, he does believe that the distribution of economic rewards is closely related to merit.

He argues that much of the apparent inequality of opportunity between classes in capitalist societies may be due to the unequal distribution of ability and effort. In other words, the children of middle-class parents may deserve to be more successful than those from working-class backgrounds because they tend to have greater genetically inherited ability and because they work harder.

If this is the case, then it is not surprising if the children of the middle class get better jobs and higher pay than the children of the working class. Nor is this evidence of inequality of opportunity as the differences of outcome may well be based on

merit. Saunders's claim that Britain is close to being a meritocracy is highly controversial. It will be discussed in detail later in the chapter in the light of studies of social mobility (see pp. 105–8).

Saunders also emphasizes the increasing opportunities for people from all backgrounds as the proportion of well-paid, middle-class jobs in the occupational structure has steadily increased.

In societies such as Britain and the USA there are fewer people who are unsuccessful than there were in the past. Whatever the relative chances of people from different classes getting a higher-class job, the absolute chances have increased for everybody. Capitalism creates more well-paid, skilled and white-collar jobs for which people from all backgrounds can compete. Saunders concludes:

> *Capitalism is dynamic because it is unequal, and any attempt to equalise wealth and income will succeed only at the expense of stifling initiative, innovation and social and economic development.*
>
> Saunders, 1990, p. 53

A critique of the New Right perspective

The New Right perspective on stratification is open to a number of criticisms. Some of Tumin's criticisms of Davis and Moore are also relevant to New Right theories. For example, the New Right can be accused of playing down the possible harmful effects of stratification in undermining social cohesion and integration. Saunders's view that socialist societies are inevitably more repressive than free-market capitalist ones could be seen as an unjustified, sweeping generalization. For example:

1 Early capitalism was partly based upon the use of slave labour.
2 In South Africa, until relatively recently, a capitalist-free market economy went hand-in-hand with the apartheid system that separated 'races' and gave black South Africans very few opportunities.
3 In Chile, a democratically elected socialist government under the leadership of President Allende was overthrown in the 1970s in a coup led by General Pinochet. Pinochet followed free market economic policies and his seizure of power was partly engineered by the USA. Yet his regime was far more repressive than that of his predecessor. One of the Pinochet regime's first actions was to round up thousands of potential opponents and take them to the national football stadium where many were executed.

Examples such as these suggest that the free market and freedom do not inevitably go hand-in-hand.

Gordon Marshall and Adam Swift – social class and social justice

Marshall and Swift (1993) have made the most detailed evaluation of Saunders's views on stratification. They criticize him for trying to argue in favour of both equality of opportunity and formal or legal equality. These two principles may sometimes coincide, but often they do not. For example, Marshall and Swift argue:

> *If a millionaire chooses to bequeath his money to an untalented layabout then justice as entitlement demands that he be permitted to do so, and forbids taxation of the inheritance despite the fact that any normal conception of justice as desert or merit is here clearly violated.*
>
> Marshall and Swift, 1993, p. 191

Marshall and Swift then go on to examine the meritocracy thesis. They question the view that market forces necessarily reward merit. Success in business, for example, may depend as much on luck as on the hard work or personal attributes of the entrepreneur.

Furthermore, Marshall and Swift provide evidence which they claim shows that capitalist societies are not genuinely meritocratic. They use data from a study conducted by Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler (1988). This study found that patterns of social mobility were influenced by class even when educational attainment was taken into account. People from working-class backgrounds had less chance than those from higher-class backgrounds of obtaining a position in one of the top classes even when they had the same level of educational qualifications.

This undermines Saunders's claim that inequalities between classes could be the result of genetic differences. Working-class people with, for example, the ability to get a degree, were still disadvantaged because of their class background. As Marshall and Swift say:

> *If people find their place in the occupational order according to meritocratic principles, then the impact of class background should not be apparent in class destinations, except as this is mediated by educational achievements.*
>
> Marshall and Swift, 1993, p. 202

The free market does not guarantee that merit is equally rewarded for all social groups. Social justice may therefore be promoted if the state intervenes to try to make job allocation meritocratic. (For more details of the study by Marshall *et al.* see pp. 102–5. For a fuller discussion of Saunders on Britain being a meritocracy see pp. 105–8.)

Social stratification – a Marxist perspective

Marxist perspectives provide a radical alternative to functionalist views of the nature of social stratification. They regard stratification as a divisive rather than an integrative structure. They see it as a mechanism whereby some exploit others, rather than as a means of furthering collective goals.

Marxists focus on social strata rather than social inequality in general. Functionalists, such as Parsons and Davis and Moore, say little about social stratification in the sense of clearly defined social strata whose members have shared interests. However, this view of social stratification is central to Marxist theory.

Marx's views will first be briefly summarized and then examined in more detail. For details of Marx's theory of stratification, see Marx 1970 (1867), 1974 (1909), Marx and Engels 1848, and Bottomore and Rubel 1963.

Classes

1 In all stratified societies, there are two major social groups: a ruling class and a subject class.
2 The power of the ruling class comes from its ownership and control of the means of production (land, capital, labour power, buildings and machinery).
3 The ruling class exploits and oppresses the subject class.
4 As a result, there is a basic conflict of interest between the two classes.
5 The various institutions of society, such as the legal and political systems, are instruments of ruling-class domination and serve to further its interests.
6 Only when the means of production are communally owned will classes disappear, thereby bringing an end to the exploitation and oppression of some by others.

From a Marxist perspective, systems of stratification derive from the relationships of social groups to the means of production. Marx used the term 'class' to refer to the main strata in all stratification systems, although most modern sociologists would reserve the term for strata in capitalist society. From a Marxist viewpoint, a class is a social group whose members share the same relationship to the means of production.

For example, in a feudal epoch, there are two main classes distinguished by their relationship to land (the crucial part of the means of production in an agricultural society). They are the feudal nobility who own the land, and the landless serfs who work the land. Similarly, in a capitalist era, there are two main classes: the bourgeoisie or capitalist class, which owns the means of production, and the proletariat or working class, whose members own only their labour which they hire to the bourgeoisie in return for wages.

Classes and historical epochs

Marx believed that Western society had developed through four main epochs:

1 primitive communism
2 ancient society
3 feudal society
4 capitalist society.

Primitive communism is represented by the societies of prehistory and provides the only example of a classless society. From then on, all societies are divided into two major classes: masters and slaves in ancient society, lords and serfs in feudal society and capitalists and wage labourers in capitalist society.

During each historical epoch, the labour power required for production was supplied by the subject class, that is by slaves, serfs and wage labourers respectively. The subject class is made up of the majority of the population whereas the ruling or dominant class forms a minority. The relationship between the two major classes will be discussed shortly.

Classes did not exist during the era of primitive communism when societies were based on a socialist mode of production. In a hunting and gathering band, the earliest form of human society, the land and its products were communally owned. The men hunted and the women gathered plant food, and the produce was shared by members of the band. Classes did not exist since all members of society shared the same relationship to the means of production. Every member was both producer and owner, all provided labour power and shared the products of their labour. Hunting and gathering is a subsistence economy which means that production only meets basic survival needs.

Classes emerge when the productive capacity of society expands beyond the level required for subsistence. This occurs when agriculture becomes the dominant mode of production. In an agricultural economy, only a section of society is needed to produce the food requirements of the whole society. Many individuals are thus freed from food production and are able to specialize in other tasks. The rudimentary division of labour of the hunting and

gathering band is replaced by an increasingly more complex and specialized division.

For example, in the early agricultural villages, some individuals became full-time producers of pottery, clothing and agricultural implements. As agriculture developed, surplus wealth – that is goods above the basic subsistence needs of the community – was produced. This led to an exchange of goods, and trading developed rapidly both within and between communities. This was accompanied by the development of a system of private property. Goods were increasingly seen as commodities or articles of trade to which the individual rather than the community had right of ownership.

Private property, and the accumulation of surplus wealth, form the basis for the development of class societies. In particular, they provide the preconditions for the emergence of a class of producers and a class of non-producers. Some people are able to acquire the means of production, and others are therefore obliged to work for them. The result is a class of non-producers which owns the means of production, and a class of producers which owns only its labour.

Dependency and conflict

From a Marxist perspective, the relationship between the major social classes is one of mutual dependence and conflict. Thus, in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and proletariat are dependent upon each other. Wage labourers must sell their labour power in order to survive, as they do not own a part of the means of production and lack the means to produce goods independently. They are, therefore, dependent for their livelihood on the capitalists and the wages they offer. The capitalists, as non-producers, are dependent on the labour power of wage labourers, since, without it, there would be no production.

However, the mutual dependency of the two classes is not a relationship of equal or symmetrical reciprocity. Instead, it is a relationship of exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. In particular, the ruling class gains at the expense of the subject class and there is therefore a conflict of interest between them.

This may be illustrated by Marx's view of the nature of ownership and production in capitalist society.

The capitalist economy and exploitation

The basic characteristics of a capitalist economy may be summarized as follows:

1 Capital may be defined as money used to finance the production of commodities for private gain.
2 In a capitalist economy, goods and the labour power, raw materials and machinery used to produce them, are given a monetary value.
3 The capitalists invest their capital in the production of goods.
4 Capital is accumulated by selling those goods at a value greater than their cost of production.

Capitalism therefore involves the investment of capital in the production of commodities with the aim of maximizing profit in order to accumulate more capital. Money is converted into commodities by financing production, those commodities are then sold and converted back into money at such a price that the capitalists end up with more money than they started with.

Capital is privately owned by a minority, the capitalist class. In Marx's view, however, this capital is gained from the exploitation of the mass of the population, the working class. Marx argued that capital, as such, produces nothing. Only labour produces wealth. Yet the wages paid to the workers for their labour are well below the value of the goods they produce.

The difference between the value of wages and commodities is known as surplus value. This surplus value is appropriated in the form of profit by the capitalists. Because they are non-producers, the bourgeoisie are therefore exploiting the proletariat, the real producers of wealth.

Marx maintained that in all class societies, the ruling class exploits and oppresses the subject class.

Power and the superstructure

Political power, in Marxist theory, comes from economic power. The power of the ruling class therefore stems from its ownership and control of the means of production. As the superstructure of society – the major institutions, values and belief systems – is seen to be largely shaped by the economic infrastructure, the relations of production will be reproduced in the superstructure. Therefore, the dominance of the ruling class in the relations of production will be reflected in the superstructure. In particular, the political and legal systems will reflect ruling-class interests since, in Marx's words, 'the existing relations of production between individuals must necessarily express themselves also as political and legal relations'.

For instance, the various ownership rights of the capitalist class will be enshrined in and protected by the laws of the land. Thus the various parts of the superstructure can be seen as instruments of ruling-class domination and as mechanisms for the oppression of the subject class.

In the same way, the position of the dominant class is supported by beliefs and values which are systematically generated by the infrastructure. As noted on page 13, Marx referred to the dominant concepts of class societies as ruling-class ideology

since they justify and legitimate ruling-class domination and project a distorted picture of reality. For example, the emphasis on freedom in capitalist society, illustrated by phrases such as 'the free market', 'free democratic societies' and 'the free world', is an illusion that disguises the wage slavery of the proletariat.

Ruling-class ideology produces false class consciousness, a false picture of the nature of the relationship between social classes. Members of both classes tend to accept the status quo as normal and natural and are largely unaware of the true nature of exploitation and oppression. In this way, the conflict of interest between the classes is disguised and a degree of social stability produced, but the basic contradictions and conflicts of class societies remain unresolved.

Class and social change

Class struggle

Marx believed that the class struggle was the driving force of social change. He stated that 'the history of all societies up to the present is the history of the class struggle'.

A new historical epoch is created by the development of superior forces of production by a new social group. These developments take place within the framework of the previous era. The merchants and industrialists who spearheaded the rise of capitalism emerged during the feudal era. They accumulated capital, laid the foundations for industrial manufacture, factory production and the system of wage labour, all of which were essential components of capitalism. The superiority of the capitalist mode of production led to a rapid transformation of the structure of society. The capitalist class became dominant, and although the feudal aristocracy maintained aspects of its power well into the nineteenth century, it was fighting a losing battle.

The class struggles of history have been between minorities. Capitalism, for instance, developed from the struggle between the feudal aristocracy and the emerging capitalist class, both groups in numerical terms forming a minority of the population. Major changes in history have involved the replacement of one form of private property by another, and of one type of production technique by another: capitalism involved the replacement of privately owned land and an agricultural economy by privately owned capital and an industrial economy.

Marx believed that the class struggle that would transform capitalist society would involve none of these processes. The protagonists would be the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, a minority versus a majority. Private property would be replaced by communally owned property. Industrial manufacture would remain as the basic technique of production in the new society.

Marx believed that the basic contradictions contained in a capitalist economic system would lead to its eventual destruction. The proletariat would overthrow the bourgeoisie and seize the means of production, the source of power. Property would be communally owned and, since all members of society would now share the same relationship to the means of production, a classless society would result. Since history is the history of the class struggle, history would now end. The communist society which would replace capitalism would contain no contradictions, no conflicts of interest, and would therefore be unchanging. However, certain changes were necessary before the dawning of this utopia.

Class consciousness

Marx distinguished between a 'class in itself' and a 'class for itself'. A class in itself is simply a social group whose members share the same relationship to the means of production. Marx argued that a social group only fully becomes a class when it becomes a class for itself. At this stage, its members have class consciousness and class solidarity. Class consciousness means that false class consciousness has been replaced by a full awareness of the true situation, by a realization of the nature of exploitation. Members of a class then develop a common identity, recognize their shared interests and unite, so creating class solidarity. The final stage of class consciousness and class solidarity is reached when members realize that only by collective action can they overthrow the ruling class, and take positive steps to do so.

Marx believed that the following aspects of capitalist society would eventually lead to the proletariat developing into a 'class for itself'.

1 Capitalist society is by its very nature unstable. It is based on contradictions and antagonisms which can only be resolved by its transformation. In particular, the conflict of interest between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat cannot be resolved within the framework of a capitalist economy. The basic conflict of interest involves the exploitation of workers by the capitalists.

2 Marx believed that this first contradiction would be highlighted by a second: the contradiction between social production and individual ownership. As capitalism developed, the workforce was increasingly concentrated in large factories where production was a social enterprise. Social production juxtaposed with individual ownership illuminates the exploitation of the proletariat. Social production also makes it easier for workers to organize themselves against the capitalists. It facilitates communication and encourages a recognition of common circumstances and interests.

Polarization of the classes

Apart from the basic contradictions of capitalist society, Marx believed that certain factors in the natural development of a capitalist economy would hasten its downfall. These factors would result in the polarization of the two main classes: the gap between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie will become greater and the contrast between the two groups will become more stark. Such factors include:

1 First, the increasing use of machinery will result in a homogeneous working class. Since 'machinery obliterates the differences in labour', members of the proletariat will become increasingly similar. The differences between skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers will tend to disappear as machines remove the skill required in the production of commodities.
2 Second, the difference in wealth between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat will increase as the accumulation of capital proceeds. Even though the real wages and living standards of the proletariat may rise, its members will become poorer in relation to the bourgeoisie. This process is known as pauperization.
3 Third, the competitive nature of capitalism means that only the largest and most wealthy companies will survive and prosper. Competition will depress the intermediate strata – those groups lying between the two main classes – into the proletariat. Thus the petty bourgeoisie, the owners of small businesses, will sink into the proletariat. At the same time the surviving companies will grow larger and capital will be concentrated into fewer hands.

These three processes – the obliteration of the differences in labour, the pauperization of the working class, and the depression of the intermediate strata into the proletariat – will result in the polarization of the two major classes.

Marx believed he could see the process of polarization in nineteenth-century Britain. He wrote that 'society as a whole is more and more splitting into two great hostile camps ... bourgeoisie and proletariat'. The battle lines were now clearly drawn: Marx hoped that the proletarian revolution would shortly follow and the communist utopia of his dreams would finally become a reality.

Marx's work on class has been examined in detail for the following reasons:

1 Many sociologists claim that his theory still provides the best explanation of the nature of class in capitalist society.
2 Much of the research on class has been inspired by ideas and questions raised by Marx.
3 Many of the concepts of class analysis introduced by Marx have proved useful to Marxists and non-Marxists alike.

Social stratification – a Weberian perspective

The work of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) represents one of the most important developments in stratification theory since Marx. Weber believed that social stratification results from a struggle for scarce resources in society. Although he saw this struggle as being primarily concerned with economic resources, it can also involve struggles for prestige and for political power.

Market situation

Like Marx, Weber saw class in economic terms (Weber, 1947). He argued that classes develop in market economies in which individuals compete for economic gain. He defined a class as a group of individuals who share a similar position in a market economy, and by virtue of that fact receive similar economic rewards. Thus, in Weber's terminology, a person's 'class situation' is basically their 'market situation'. Those who share a similar class situation also share similar life chances. Their economic position will directly affect their chances of obtaining those things defined as desirable in their society, for example access to higher education and good quality housing.

Like Marx, Weber argued that the major class division is between those who own the forces of production and those who do not. Thus those who have substantial property holdings will receive the highest economic rewards and enjoy superior life chances. However, Weber saw important differences in the market situation of the propertyless groups in society. In particular, the various skills and services offered by different occupations have differing market values. For instance, in capitalist society, managers, administrators and professionals receive relatively high salaries because of the demand for their services. Weber distinguished the following class groupings in capitalist society:

1 the propertied upper class
2 the propertyless white-collar workers
3 the petty bourgeoisie
4 the manual working class.

In his analysis of class, Weber disagreed with Marx on a number of important issues:

1 Factors other than the ownership or non-ownership of property are significant in the formation of classes. In particular, the market value of the skills of the propertyless groups varies and the resulting differences in economic return are sufficient to produce different social classes.

2 Weber saw no evidence to support the idea of the polarization of classes. Although he saw some decline in the numbers of the petty bourgeoisie (the small property owners) due to competition from large companies, he argued that they enter white-collar or skilled manual trades rather than being depressed into the ranks of unskilled manual workers. More importantly, Weber argued that the white-collar 'middle class' expands rather than contracts as capitalism develops. He maintained that capitalist enterprises and the modern nation state require a 'rational' bureaucratic administration which involves large numbers of administrators and clerical staff. Thus Weber saw a diversification of classes and an expansion of the white-collar middle class, rather than a polarization.

3 Weber rejected the view, held by some Marxists, of the inevitability of the proletarian revolution. He saw no reason why those sharing a similar class situation should necessarily develop a common identity, recognize shared interests and take collective action to further those interests. For example, Weber suggested that individual manual workers who are dissatisfied with their class situation may respond in a variety of ways. They may grumble, work to rule, sabotage industrial machinery, take strike action, or attempt to organize other members of their class in an effort to overthrow capitalism. Weber admitted that a common market situation might provide a basis for collective class action but he saw this only as a possibility.

4 Weber rejected the Marxist view that political power necessarily derives from economic power. He argued that class forms only one possible basis for power and that the distribution of power in society is not necessarily linked to the distribution of class inequalities.

Status situation

While class forms one possible basis for group formation, collective action and the acquisition of political power, Weber argued that there are other bases for these activities. In particular, groups form because their members share a similar status situation. Whereas class refers to the unequal distribution of economic rewards, status refers to the unequal distribution of 'social honour'.

Occupations, ethnic and religious groups, and, most importantly, lifestyles, are accorded differing degrees of prestige or esteem by members of society. A status group is made up of individuals who are awarded a similar amount of social honour and therefore share the same status situation. Unlike classes, members of status groups are almost always aware of their common status situation. They share a similar lifestyle, identify with and feel they belong to their status group, and often place restrictions on the ways in which outsiders may interact with them.

Weber argued that status groups reach their most developed form in the caste system of traditional Hindu society in India. Castes and sub-castes were formed and distinguished largely in terms of social honour; lifestyles were sharply differentiated and accorded varying degrees of prestige.

Social closure

Castes also provide a good example of the process described by Weber as social closure. Social closure involves the exclusion of some people from membership of a status group. In the caste system social closure is achieved through prohibitions which prevent members of a caste from marrying outside their caste. The caste system is an extreme example of social closure since the exclusion of outsiders from the status group is so complete. Another example was the apartheid system in South Africa which lasted from the 1940s until 1992. The population was divided into whites, Asians, black Africans, and 'coloured' people descended from more than one 'race'. These different groups were kept apart in public places (for example they were required to use different public toilets), they had to live in different neighbourhoods and they were prohibited from marrying someone from a different group. Not surprisingly the better facilities and neighbourhoods were reserved for the dominant white population.

Other status groups erect less formidable barriers to entry. In modern Britain, studies of elite self-recruitment suggest that certain types of job, such as senior positions in the Civil Service, are usually filled by those who have attended public school. Although individuals who went to state schools have some chance of entering these jobs, public school educated elites largely reserve such positions for themselves and their children's group. (For details of elite self-recruitment see Chapter 9.)

Class and status groups

In many societies, class and status situations are closely linked. Weber noted that 'property as such is not always recognized as a status qualification, but

in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity'. However, those who share the same class situation will not necessarily belong to the same status group. For example, the *nouveaux riches* (the newly rich) are sometimes excluded from the status groups of the privileged because their tastes, manners and dress are defined as vulgar.

Status groups may create divisions within classes. In a study of Banbury, in Oxfordshire, conducted in the 1950s, Margaret Stacey (1960) found that members of the manual working class distinguished three status groups within that class: the 'respectable working class', the 'ordinary working class' and the 'rough working class'.

Economic factors influenced the formation of these groups – for example, the 'roughs' were often in the lowest income bracket – but they did not determine status since the income of many 'roughs' was similar to that of members of other status groups.

Status groups can also cut across class divisions. For example, homosexuals from different class backgrounds are involved in Gay Rights organizations and events such as the annual Gay Pride celebration in Britain.

Weber's observations on status groups are important because they suggest that in certain situations status rather than class provides the basis for the formation of social groups. In addition, the presence of different status groups within a single class and of status groups which cut across class divisions can weaken class solidarity and reduce the potential for class consciousness. These points are illustrated by Weber's analysis of 'parties'.

Parties

Weber defined parties as groups which are specifically concerned with influencing policies and making decisions in the interests of their membership. In Weber's words, parties are concerned with 'the acquisition of social "power"'.

Parties include a variety of associations, from the mass political parties of Western democracies to the whole range of pressure or interest groups which include professional associations, trades unions, the Automobile Association and the RSPCA. Parties often, but not necessarily, represent the interests of classes or status groups. In Weber's words, 'Parties may represent interests determined through "class situation" or "status situation" .... In most cases they are partly class parties and partly status parties, but sometimes they are neither.'

The combination of class and status interests can be seen in a group such as the Nation of Islam in the USA. As well as being a religious group it is also active in trying to achieve political change. It represents a status group but it also represents class interests – the majority of its members are working class.

Weber's view of parties suggests that the relationship between political groups and class and status groups is far from clearcut. Just as status groups can both divide classes and cut across class boundaries, so parties can divide and cut across both classes and status groups. Weber's analysis of classes, status groups and parties suggests that no single theory can pinpoint and explain their relationship. The interplay of class, status and party in the formation of social groups is complex and variable and must be examined in particular societies during particular time periods.

Marx attempted to reduce all forms of inequality to social class and argued that classes formed the only significant social groups in society. Weber argues that the evidence provides a more complex and diversified picture of social stratification.

Modern theories of stratification

Most contemporary studies of stratification are based either upon a Marxist or a Weberian perspective. Some modern sociologists have remained close to the original theories of Marx and Weber. Others have drawn their inspiration from one or other of these classic sociologists, but have made significant alterations to their original theories in an attempt to describe and explain the class structures of capitalist industrial societies. Such sociologists can be referred to as new, or neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians.

There has been a long-standing debate between those who draw their inspiration from Marx, and those who follow Weber, as to which approach is more useful as a way of developing a sociological understanding of class. We will analyse this debate in later sections of this chapter when we deal with the different classes in contemporary capitalism. Contemporary neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian theories of the class structure as a whole will also be examined towards the end of the chapter. In the next section, however, we will consider how the stratification system has changed over time in British society.

Changes in the British stratification system

As we discovered in the previous section, most contemporary theories of stratification have been influenced by the pioneering work of Marx or Weber. Despite the differences between these sociologists, both gave primary importance to material inequalities. Marx saw the most important divisions in any system of stratification as stemming from differences in the ownership of wealth, and specifically ownership of the means of production. Weber also saw ownership of wealth as an important criterion for distinguishing classes. Weber, however, placed more emphasis than Marx on divisions within the propertyless class – the class whose members did not own sufficient property to support themselves without working. Income levels and other life chances for this group depended largely upon the market situation of the occupational group to which the individuals belonged.

No system of class stratification is fixed and static. The distribution of resources within the class system constantly changes, and the size and market situation of occupational groups also alters over time. The next sections will describe some of the broad patterns of change in the composition of the occupational structure and the distribution of income and wealth in Britain in the twentieth century. Later sections will examine the changing position of particular classes in more detail.

Changes in the occupational structure

Sociologists from Marx and Weber onwards have debated how best to define social classes. Many, though not all, now base their class categories, at least partly, upon occupational groupings. Official government statistics distinguish between socio-economic groups, which, it is claimed, bring together people with jobs of similar social and economic status.

Although there are disagreements about where the boundary between the middle and working classes should be placed, it has often been the case that manual workers are regarded as being working class, and non-manual workers as middle class. In official publications, types of manual job are usually distinguished according to levels of skill, with separate categories being used for the unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled manual worker. Non-manual jobs are also usually divided into three categories: routine non-manual jobs, which include clerical and secretarial work; intermediate non-manual jobs such as teachers, nurses, librarians and some managers;

Table 2.1 Occupational class and industrial status of the economically active population in Great Britain, 1911, 1921, 1931, 1951, 1971 (employers in thousands)

	All					Males					Females				
	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971
1 Professional															
(a) Higher															
Employers	–	25	38	34	79	–	25	37	33	75	–	–	–	1	4
Own account	–	36	44	44	59	–	35	41	40	53	–	2	3	4	7
Employees	–	134	158	356	687	–	126	144	326	646	–	8	15	31	40
All	184	195	240	434	824	173	186	222	399	774	11	10	18	36	50
%	1.00	1.01	1.14	1.93	3.29	1.34	1.36	1.50	2.56	4.87	0.20	0.18	0.29	0.52	0.55
(b) Lower															
Employers	–	18	15	10	25	–	14	8	7	17	–	4	7	3	7
Own account	–	62	70	42	59	–	20	22	22	37	–	42	48	20	22
Employees	–	600	643	1,007	1,863	–	242	270	463	892	–	357	373	544	971
All	560	680	728	1,059	1,946	208	276	300	492	946	352	403	428	567	1,000
%	3.05	3.52	3.46	4.70	7.78	1.61	2.02	2.03	3.16	5.95	6.49	7.07	6.83	8.18	10.95

continued ...

	All					Males					Females				
	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971	1911	1921	1931	1951	1971
2 Employers, administrators, managers															
(a) Employers and proprietors															
Employers	763	692	727	457	621	661	613	646	400	485	102	79	82	56	136
Own account	469	626	682	661	435	339	435	483	494	320	130	191	196	167	115
All	1,232	1,318	1,409	1,118	1,056	1,000	1,048	1,129	894	805	232	270	278	223	251
%	6.71	6.82	6.70	4.97	4.22	7.74	7.69	7.65	5.74	5.07	4.28	4.74	4.44	3.22	2.75
(b) Managers and administrators															
Own account	21	29	30	31	46	20	27	28	27	35	2	2	2	2	11
Employees	608	675	740	1,215	2,008	486	557	642	1,029	1,698	123	118	98	186	310
All	629	704	770	1,246	2,054	506	584	670	1,056	1,733	125	120	100	189	321
%	3.43	3.64	3.66	5.53	8.21	3.91	4.28	4.54	6.78	10.91	2.30	2.11	1.60	2.73	3.51
3 Clerical workers															
Own account	–	1	2	3	22	–	1	2	2	5	–	–	–	1	17
Employees	887	1,299	1,463	2,401	3,457	708	735	815	988	1,008	179	564	648	1,413	2,449
All	887	1,300	1,465	2,404	3,479	708	736	817	990	1,013	179	564	648	1,414	2,466
%	4.84	6.72	6.97	10.68	13.90	5.48	5.40	5.53	6.35	6.38	3.30	9.90	10.34	20.41	27.00
4 Foremen, inspectors, supervisors															
Employees	236	279	323	590	968	227	261	295	511	801	10	18	28	79	168
%	1.29	1.44	1.54	2.62	3.87	1.75	1.91	2.00	3.28	5.04	0.18	0.32	0.45	1.14	1.84
5 Skilled manual															
Own account	329	293	268	251	349	170	205	200	214	324	159	88	68	37	25
Employees	5,279	5,280	5,351	5,365	5,045	4,094	4,200	4,223	4,519	4,295	1,185	1,080	1,128	847	750
All	5,608	5,573	5,619	5,616	5,394	4,264	4,405	4,423	4,733	4,619	1,344	1,168	1,196	884	775
%	30.56	28.83	26.72	24.95	21.56	32.99	32.30	29.96	30.36	29.08	24.78	20.50	19.09	12.75	8.48
6 Semi-skilled manual															
Own account	71	98	96	82	53	41	70	78	73	35	30	28	17	10	18
Employees	7,173	6,446	7,264	7,256	6,258	4,305	3,789	4,181	4,279	3,272	2,868	2,656	3,084	2,978	2,986
All	7,244	6,544	7,360	7,338	6,312	4,346	3,859	4,259	4,352	3,307	2,898	2,684	3,101	2,988	3,005
%	39.48	33.85	35.00	32.60	25.23	33.63	28.30	28.85	27.92	20.82	53.42	47.11	49.51	43.12	32.90
7 Unskilled manual															
Own account	47	62	78	33	92	38	48	65	29	86	9	14	13	3	6
Employees	1,720	2,678	3,034	2,676	2,895	1,455	2,232	2,580	2,129	1,803	265	446	454	547	1,092
All	1,767	2,740	3,115	2,709	2,987	1,493	2,280	2,645	2,158	1,889	274	460	467	550	1,098
%	9.63	14.17	14.81	12.03	11.94	11.55	16.72	17.92	13.84	11.89	5.05	8.07	7.45	7.94	12.02
All	18,347	19,333	21,029	22,514	25,021	12,925	13,636	14,761	15,584	15,884	5,425	5,697	6,264	6,930	9,138
%	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Note: Because numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand, totals may not equal the sum of their parts.
Source: G. Routh (1980) *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain 1906–79*, Macmillan, London, pp. 6–7

Table 2.2* Socio-economic group by sex: 1975 to 1994

All persons aged 16 and over (%)

Socio-economic group	1975	1979	1981	1983	1985	1987	1989	1991	1993	1994
Men										
Professional	5	6	4	5	6	7	7	7	7	7
Employers and managers	15	15	15	17	19	19	20	19	20	21
Intermediate and junior non-manual	17	17	17	15	17	16	16	17	17	17
Skilled manual and self-employed	41	40	41	39	37	37	38	38	37	35
Semi-skilled manual and personal service	17	17	18	18	16	15	15	14	14	14
Unskilled manual	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	4	5
Base = 100%	10,902	10,280	10,880	8,886	8,787	9,190	8,815	8,596	8,089	7,948
Women										
Professional	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
Employers and managers	4	5	5	6	7	8	9	9	10	11
Intermediate and junior non-manual	46	45	46	46	48	47	47	48	49	48
Skilled manual and self-employed	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	9	8	8
Semi-skilled manual and personal service	31	30	29	30	27	26	25	22	22	22
Unskilled manual	9	10	10	9	7	9	8	11	10	9
Base = 100%	11,799	11,102	11,743	9,754	9,439	9,976	9,600	9,254	9,009	8,698
Total										
Professional	3	3	2	3	3	4	4	4	4	4
Employers and managers	9	10	9	11	13	14	14	14	15	16
Intermediate and junior non-manual	32	32	32	31	33	32	32	33	34	33
Skilled manual and self-employed	24	24	24	24	23	23	23	23	22	21
Semi-skilled manual and personal service	24	24	24	24	22	21	20	18	18	18
Unskilled manual	7	8	8	7	6	7	7	8	7	7
Base = 100%	22,701	21,382	22,623	18,640	18,226	19,166	18,415	17,850	17,098	16,646

* The socio-economic group shown is based on the informant's own job (or last job if not in employment). Excludes those in the armed forces and any who have never worked.

Source: N. Bennett, L. Jarvis, O. Rowlands, N. Singleton and L. Haselden (1996) *Living in Britain: Results from the 1994 General Household Survey*, HMSO, London, p. 195.

and the highest class in this scheme, which includes professionals, such as doctors and accountants, as well as senior managers.

Although calculated in different ways, Tables 2.1 and 2.2 are both based upon the idea of socio-economic grouping. Table 2.1 shows changes in the occupational structure between 1911 and 1971. Table 2.2 is calculated on a different basis but shows changes between 1975 and 1994. (Table 2.2 includes personal service workers in the same category as semi-skilled manual and so includes a wider range of workers in the lower classes than Table 2.1.)

The shift to non-manual employment

The information contained in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 shows that there has been a long-term trend during the twentieth century for the proportion of non-manual jobs to increase, and of manual jobs to decrease. Less than half of all employees now have manual jobs, whereas in 1911, according to Routh, 79

per cent of jobs were manual. According to the *General Household Survey*, the proportion of manual and personal service workers declined from 55 per cent to 46 per cent between 1975 and 1994. There have been marked increases in professional, managerial, and routine non-manual work.

Over the course of the twentieth century various factors contributed to the shift towards non-manual employment. Manufacturing industry declined, while service industries, which employ a lower proportion of manual workers, expanded.

Between 1983 and June 1997, employment in all production and construction industries fell from 5,644,000 to 4,245,000. Employment in service industries over the same period rose from 13,541,000 to 16,865,000 (*Labour Market Trends*, 1997).

For much of the period since the Second World War, increasing numbers of people have been employed in jobs connected to the welfare state, particularly in the National Health Service (NHS), education and the welfare services. Employment has also expanded in local and national government. However, government policies since the late 1980s have reduced employment in local government and the civil service as a number of government functions have been privatized. Employment in public administration, defence and compulsory social security fell from 1,468,000 in 1983 to 1,308,000 in June 1997. Over the same period employment in hotels and restaurants rose from 917,000 to 1,249,000, and in renting, research, computer and other business activities from 1,562,000 to 2,617,000 (*Labour Market Trends*, 1997). Most of the increases in service sector employment have therefore come from the private sector.

Gender, full-time and part-time work

Women, particularly married women, increasingly started taking paid employment during the twentieth century, but they are not equally distributed throughout the occupational structure. Although women are more likely to have non-manual jobs than men, most female non-manual workers are concentrated in the lowest-paid sectors of non-manual work, and have routine non-manual jobs. As Table 2.2 shows, 48 per cent of female employees were in intermediate and junior non-manual jobs in 1994. Most of the remaining female employees (31 per cent) were in semi-skilled or unskilled manual work or personal service jobs.

Table 2.3, showing full- and part-time employment by gender, reveals a number of significant

Table 2.3 Full and part-time employment by gender

	Males (thousands)			Females (thousands)		
	Full-time	Part-time	All in employment[2]	Full-time	Part-time	All in employment[2]
1984	13,408	610	14,083	5,543	4,356	9,936
1985	15,537	670	14,217	5,697	4,465	10,173
1986	13,450	707	14,174	5,834	4,523	10,371
1987	13,488	798	14,309	5,953	4,651	10,621
1988	13,941	852	14,824	6,276	4,739	11,036
1989	14,347	846	15,219	6,493	4,964	11,470
1990	14,387	920	15,318	6,643	4,968	11,617
1991	13,958	919	14,887	6,541	4,966	11,512
1992	13,304	1,009	14,321	6,445	5,040	11,491
1993	12,990	1,037	14,035	6,383	5,085	11,476
1994	13,050	1,115	14,171	6,354	5,163	11,526
1995	13,200	1,171	14,374	6,440	5,153	11,599
1996	13,197	1,244	14,446	6,464	5,305	11,773
1997	13,386	1,328	14,720	6,592	5,367	11,962

1 At spring each year. Includes employees, self-employed, those on government employment and training programmes, and from 1992 unpaid family workers.
Full/part-time is based on respondents' self-assessment.
2 Includes those who did not state whether they worked full-time or part-time.
Source: (1998) *Social Trends*, HMSO: London, p. 80.

trends. Male full-time employment declined slightly between 1984 and 1997, but part-time employment for men increased considerably, while female full-time and part-time employment both increased significantly. The traditional male 'breadwinner' with a full-time job is part of a declining group in the workforce. Women make up a growing proportion of the workforce and are rapidly catching up with men. Traditionally studies of class have concentrated on male full-time workers. The changes outlined here indicate that this is becoming less and less justifiable.

The changing distribution of income

The importance of income

Some sociologists have argued that inequalities in industrial societies are being progressively reduced; others go further and claim that class divisions are disappearing. Income has an important effect upon your life chances: for example on the chances of owning your own home, and on your life expectancy. If income inequalities were gradually disappearing this would be strong evidence that class divisions were weakening.

Some government policies seem designed to achieve greater income equality by redistributing income from more affluent to poorer groups. However, as we will see in the following sections, income can be measured in various ways and official statistics should be used with caution. In addition, it should not be assumed that long-term trends in income distribution continue forever: there is evidence that there have been significant changes in these trends in Britain in recent years. In particular, a long-term trend towards a more equitable distribution of income has been reversed.

The measurement of income distribution

Official statistics measure income in a variety of ways:

1 Original income refers to income from sources such as employment, occupational pensions, gifts, alimony payments, and investment. Figures on original income do not include benefits such as state pensions, family credit, and income support, which are paid by the state.
2 Gross income is a measure of all sources of income. Most individuals are not, however, free to spend all of their gross income, for some is deducted to pay income tax and national insurance contributions.
3 Disposable income is a measure of gross income less the above deductions.
4 Some taxes (indirect taxes) are not paid directly out of income, but are paid by consumers as part of the purchase price of goods. For example, value added tax (VAT) is payable on most categories of goods in the UK. Duties are also payable on products such as petrol, tobacco and alcohol. Post-tax income is the measure of income after the above taxes, and taxes such as the Council Tax, are deducted.
5 Final income adds on to income after taxes the value of benefits provided by the state which are not given in cash, for example medical care and education.

By examining these different measures it is possible to discover the effects of government policy on the distribution of income. Table 2.4 gives figures for 1995–6, based upon the *Family Expenditure Survey*.

The effects of taxation and benefits

Table 2.4 demonstrates that even after taxation and benefits are taken into account, considerable income inequalities remain. In 1995–6, the poorest 20 per cent of households received little more than half the average final income, whilst the richest 20 per cent received nearly twice the national average. However, it is clear that benefits help to reduce income inequality. In particular, benefits boost the very low original income of the poorest 20 per cent of households. Overall taxation and benefits also reduce the final income of richer groups in the population, although less than the higher rates of income tax for high earners would suggest. This is partly because poorer groups in the population tend to pay a higher proportion of their income in indirect taxes than richer ones.

The official government figures need to be treated with some caution. Only about 70 per cent of households approached agreed to participate in the *Family Expenditure Survey*. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the information obtained is entirely reliable. Individuals may not declare all their income, particularly if they have not been truthful to the Inland Revenue or the DSS. The figures may be particularly prone to underestimating the income of the highest earners, who have more opportunities to hide substantial amounts of income than middle- and lower-income groups.

Sources of income

Income comes from a number of sources. According to British government statistics, wages and salaries are the most important source of income in the United Kingdom. In 1995, 56 per cent of all household income came from this source, 13 per cent from social security benefits, 11 per cent from private pensions and annuities, etc., 10 per cent from self-employment, 7 per cent from rent, dividends and interest, and 3 per cent from other current transfers (such as payments from abroad, from charities and government grants) (*Social Trends*, 1997).

Table 2.4 Redistribution of income through taxes and benefits, 1995–6

	Quintile groups of households (1 = poorest)					
	Bottom fifth	Next fifth	Middle fifth	Next fifth	Top fifth	All
Average per household						
Wages and salaries	1,390	4,050	10,390	17,610	29,810	12,650
Imputed income from benefits in kind	30	30	100	290	890	270
Self-employment income	370	570	1,250	1,670	5,050	1,780
Occupational pensions, annuities	290	950	1,310	1,790	2,410	1,350
Investment income	200	340	580	830	2,640	920
Other income	150	160	170	250	460	240
Total original income	2,430	6,090	13,790	22,450	41,260	17,200
plus Benefits in cash						
Contributory	1,860	2,280	1,710	1,180	770	1,560
Non-contributory	3,050	2,380	1,650	950	430	1,690
Gross income	7,340	10,750	17,150	24,580	42,450	20,450
less Income tax and NIC	540	930	2,480	4,470	9,660	3,610
less Local taxes (gross)	590	590	650	710	820	670
Disposable income	6,210	9,230	14,020	19,400	31,980	16,170
less Indirect taxes	1,930	2,340	3,290	4,090	5,090	3,350
Post-tax income	4,280	6,890	10,730	15,310	26,890	12,820
plus Benefits in kind						
Education	1,810	1,300	1,420	1,070	830	1,290
National Health Service	1,890	1,830	1,730	1,520	1,330	1,660
Housing subsidy	90	80	40	20	10	50
Travel subsidies	50	70	60	60	140	70
School meals and welfare milk	100	30	10	–	–	30
Final income	8,230	10,200	13,990	17,980	29,200	15,920

Source: (1998) *Social Trends*, HMSO, London, p. 101.

Alissa Goodman, Paul Johnson and Steven Webb have conducted a study of household income inequality between 1961 and 1993 in Britain, based on data from the *Family Expenditure Survey* (Goodman, Johnson and Webb, 1997). They found that over this period the proportion of income received from wages declined from over three-quarters of all income to around 60 per cent, whereas social security payments doubled from around 10 per cent of all income to around 20 per cent. One of the main reasons for this change was the rising numbers of unemployed, pensioners, single parents, sick and disabled who are entitled to benefit. The sources of income vary considerably for households at different income levels. For example, Goodman, Johnson and Webb found that, in 1992–3, the richest fifth of the population received 61 per cent of all income from investments, compared to the poorest fifth who received just 3 per cent of income from this source. In comparison, 29 per cent of social security payments went to the poorest fifth of the population compared to 8 per cent going to the richest fifth.

Trends in income distribution 1949–79

Despite the limitations of the official figures, they do at least provide some indication of the overall historical trends in the distribution of income. In 1979, the Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income and Wealth published a report examining the changes in the distribution of income and wealth between 1949 and 1978–9. The results relating to income are summarized in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 demonstrates that in the period covered there was some income redistribution, but mainly towards middle-income groups rather than those on the lowest levels. The top 10 per cent of income earners reduced their share of total income by 3.7 per cent, but the bottom 30 per cent also had their share reduced, in this case by 2.5 per cent. Although there was a slight shift in income distribution – from the top half of income earners to the bottom half – the poorest were not the beneficiaries.

Changes in taxation

The Royal Commission report was published in 1979, the same year as Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power. Successive Conservative governments implemented policies that reversed the slight trend for income redistribution to poorer groups. The policies that had the most direct impact concerned income tax.

Income tax is a progressive tax because higher earners pay a higher proportion of their income in this tax than lower earners. If overall levels of income tax are cut, and if the higher rates in particular are reduced, the redistributive effects of taxation become smaller. Between 1979 and 1997, the basic rate of income tax was reduced from 33 to 23 per cent, while the highest rate fell from 80 to 40 per cent. In 1992, a lower-rate band of 20 per cent was introduced on the first £2,000 of taxable income; this was widened to £4,100 by April 1997. By the early 1990s the government was running into problems financing government spending and was forced to raise extra taxes. Although most of the extra revenue needed was raised through increases in indirect tax, there was an increase in national insurance contributions of 1 per cent in 1994. National Insurance contributions are effectively a form of direct tax. In 1997, a new Labour government was elected in Britain, the first Labour government for 18 years. Although traditionally committed to a redistributive tax system, the incoming government pledged not to increase income tax rates and to stick to Conservative spending limits in its early years in government.

Since 1979 there has been a distinct shift towards indirect taxation, which tends to take a greater proportion of the income of lower income groups than it takes from those on higher incomes. Government statistics show that the 20 per cent of households with the highest disposable income paid much less than 20 per cent of their disposable income in indirect taxes, compared to the poorest 20 per cent, who paid nearly 30 per cent of their income in this way (*Social Trends*, 1997). In 1979, the twin VAT rates of 8 and 12.5 per cent were replaced with a single rate of 15 per cent. This was raised again to 17.5 per cent in 1991.

In March 1993, it was announced that VAT would be extended to include domestic fuel and would be charged at 8 per cent. In 1997, the new Labour government cut the VAT rate on domestic fuel from 8 to 5 per cent. Other important types of indirect tax are the duties levied on petrol, alcohol and tobacco.

There have also been important changes in the local taxes used to finance local government. In 1990

Table 2.5 Distribution of income in the UK before and after tax, 1949–78/9

	Percentage share of total income					
	Before tax			After tax		
	Top 10%	Next 60%	Bottom 30%	Top 10%	Next 60%	Bottom 30%
1949	33.2	54.1	12.7	27.1	58.3	14.6
1954	29.8	59.3	10.9	24.8	63.1	12.1
1959	29.4	60.9	9.7	25.2	63.5	11.2
1964	29.0	61.2	9.6	25.1	64.1	10.8
1967	28.0	61.6	10.4	24.3	63.7	12.0
1973–74	26.8	62.3	10.9	23.6	63.6	12.8
1978–79	26.1	63.5	10.4	23.4	64.5	12.1

Source: A.B. Atkinson (1983) *The Economics of Inequality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 53

the community charge, or 'poll tax', replaced a system based on property values called 'rates'. This meant that the taxation system in Britain became more regressive. Regressive taxes take a higher proportion of the income of those with low incomes than of those with high incomes. Under the poll tax, all those living in particular areas were charged the same, regardless of their ability to pay. Even though there were rebates on this tax of up to 80 per cent for the poorest, under the old rates system the worst-off had been able to claim a full 100 per cent rebate. The new tax proved extremely unpopular and in 1993 it was replaced by the rather less regressive council tax. This went back to the principle of basing local taxes on the value of property.

Figure 2.1 shows the results of a study by Christopher Giles and Paul Johnson into the effects of tax changes on the proportions of their income paid in tax by different groups in the population (Giles and Johnson, 1994). The population is divided into ten groups ranked according to level of income. Decile 1 represents the 10 per cent of the population with the lowest income; decile 10 the 10 per cent with the highest. The figure shows that between 1985 and 1995 taxation changes continued to favour the better off. The poorest 50 per cent of the population of Britain saw its taxes rise, while the richest 50 per cent saw its taxes cut.

Recent changes in the distribution of income

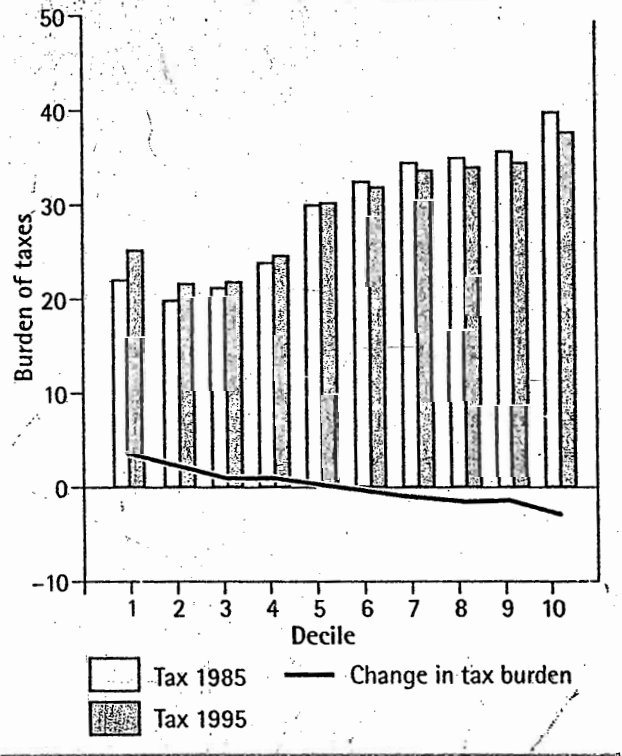
The study of household income inequality by Goodman, Johnson and Webb introduced above (see p. 44) clearly shows that any long-term trend towards more equitable income distribution has been reversed in the UK.

Table 2.6 shows that the poorest tenth and the poorest 50 per cent of the population both saw a fall in the proportion of national income they received between 1981–3 and 1991–3. This was particularly pronounced in the poorest tenth of the population whose share fell from 4.1 to 2.9 per cent. On the other hand, the richest 10 per cent of the population saw a rise from 21.3 to 26.2 per cent over the same period.

Goodman, Johnson and Webb found a number of reasons for these trends. One was a rise in inequalities in pay for male workers during the 1980s. Unemployment among males rose particularly fast in households where nobody else was working, making those households completely reliant upon benefits. Technological changes and government policies led to a reduction in the demand for unskilled labour and increasing unemployment and falling wages for unskilled workers. More people became reliant upon self-employment as their main source of income. The self-employed are disproportionately found among both the highest-earning and the lowest-earning groups, further widening income inequalities.

Although income inequalities have been reduced in Britain this century, this reduction has not been sufficient to justify the claim that class divisions are disappearing. The figures suggest that both an increase in income inequality and a strengthening of class divisions occurred during the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s.

Figure 2.1 Proportions of income taken in personal tax, by decile



Source: C. Giles and P. Johnson (1994) *Taxes Down, Taxes Up: The Effects of a Decade of Tax Changes*, The Institute for Fiscal Studies, London, p. 20.

Table 2.6 Percentage income shares

	1961–63	1971–73	1981–83	1991–93
Bottom tenth	3.7	3.9	4.1	2.9
Bottom half	32.6	32.2	32.1	27.1
Top tenth	21.2	21.4	21.3	26.2

Source: A. Goodman, P. Johnson and S. Webb (1997) *Inequality in the UK*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 92.

The changing distribution of wealth?

The importance of wealth

Inequalities in the distribution of wealth, like inequalities in the distribution of income, are an important indicator of class divisions and class inequality. A particular form of wealth – the means of production – is especially important to Marxist sociologists. Like income, wealth can affect life chances, but to Marxists, ownership of the means of production also gives power. (Today ownership of the means of production usually takes the form of share ownership.) Wealth is also important in Weberian theories of stratification, although it is given less emphasis than in Marxist theories.

If it could be shown that over the years there had been a major redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor, this would indicate a reduction in class inequalities. However, wealth is perhaps even more difficult to measure than income and reliable data prove elusive.

Measuring wealth

The definition and measurement of wealth, like income, are not straightforward. One problem is that the government does not collect information on wealth for tax purposes.

There is no wealth tax on the living, but taxes do have to be paid on the estates of those who have died. Figures on the value of estates left by the deceased are sometimes used to calculate the overall distribution of wealth. However, they may not be a reliable guide to the distribution of wealth among the living: for instance individuals may transfer some of their wealth to other family members before they die. Moreover, those who die tend to be older than other members of the population, and wealth is not equally distributed between age groups.

Another method of collecting information on wealth distribution is to use survey research, but this too has its drawbacks. Those who refuse to cooperate with the research may be untypical of the population as a whole, and their failure to take part may distort the findings. Those who do cooperate may not be entirely honest, and the richest members of society may be particularly prone to underestimating their wealth.

Defining wealth

Not only is wealth difficult to measure, but defining it is also problematic. Official statistics distinguish between marketable wealth and non-marketable wealth:

1 Marketable wealth includes any type of asset that can be sold and its value realized. It therefore includes land, shares, savings in bank, building society or other accounts, homes (minus any outstanding mortgage debts), and personal possessions such as cars, works of art, and household appliances. The figures on marketable wealth exclude the value of occupational pensions which cannot normally be sold. If such pensions are included in the figures, the statistics show wealth as being more equally distributed than is otherwise the case.

2 Non-marketable wealth includes items such as salaries and non-transferable pensions.

From a sociological point of view, the official figures on wealth are not ideal. They fail to distinguish between wealth used to finance production and wealth used to finance consumption. Wealth used for production (for example shares) is of particular interest to Marxist sociologists because they believe that power largely derives from ownership of the means of production. The distribution of wealth used for consumption is of less interest to Marxists, though its distribution does give some indication of lifestyle. Such figures are also useful for indicating the distribution of various life chances, for instance the chance that different social groups have of owning their own home.

Trends in wealth distribution

Despite the limitations of the available figures, it is possible to discern overall trends in wealth distribution over the twentieth century. Table 2.7 shows trends between 1911 and 1960. Table 2.8 shows trends between 1976 and 1994. The figures in the two tables are not strictly comparable since they are calculated on a different basis. The figures in Table 2.7 include an estimate for hidden wealth; those in Table 2.8 do not. The later figures may therefore underestimate the extent to which wealth is concentrated.

Table 2.7 suggests that there has been a considerable reduction in the degree of wealth inequality this century. The changes have been more marked than the changes in the distribution of income.

Table 2.8 shows that the trend towards greater equality of wealth distribution continued until the early 1990s, when it went into reverse. Although the long-term trend was towards greater equality, this is no longer the case, and most wealth still remains concentrated in the hands of a small minority. Thus in 1994 the wealthiest 1 per cent of the population still owned 19 per cent of all marketable wealth, and the wealthiest 10 per cent owned 51 per cent, leaving the other 90 per cent of the population to share the remaining 49 per cent between them.

A number of factors have contributed to the trends noted above. Westergaard and Resler (who produced the figures for the period up to 1960 in

Table 2.7 The distribution of private property from 1911 to 1960

Groups within adult population (aged 25+) owning stated proportions of aggregate personal wealth	Estimated proportion of aggregate personal wealth owned (%) Period 1911–60 (common basis)				
	1911–13	1924–30	1936–38	1954	1960
Richest 1% owned	69	62	56	43	42
Richest 5% owned	87	84	79	71	75
Richest 10% owned	92	91	88	79	83
Hence:					
Richest 1% owned	69	62	56	43	42
Next 2–5% owned	18	22	23	28	33
Next 6–10% owned	5	7	9	8	8
95% owned only	13	16	21	29	25
90% owned only	8	9	12	21	17

Source: Westergaard and Resler (1976) *Class in a Capitalist Society*, Table [illegible]

Table 2.8 The distribution of wealth, 1976 to 1994

	1976	1981	1986	1991	1994
Marketable wealth					
Percentage of wealth owned by:					
Most wealthy 1%	21	18	18	17	19
Most wealthy 5%	38	36	36	35	38
Most wealthy 10%	50	50	50	47	51
Most wealthy 25%	71	73	73	71	73
Most wealthy 50%	92	92	90	92	93
Total marketable wealth (£ billion)	280	565	955	1,711	1,955
Marketable wealth less value of dwellings					
Percentage of wealth owned by:					
Most wealthy 1%	29	26	25	29	28
Most wealthy 5%	47	45	46	51	52
Most wealthy 10%	57	56	58	64	65
Most wealthy 25%	73	74	75	80	82
Most wealthy 50%	88	87	89	93	94

Source: [1998] *Social Trends* [MSO, London, Table [illegible]

Table 2.6) suggest that the most significant redistribution was within the wealthiest groups, rather than between them and the less well-off. A major reason for this was the transfer of assets from wealthy individuals to friends and other family members in order to avoid death duties.

In recent decades the most important factor has probably been the increasing number of home owners, although the slump in house prices in the early 1990s temporarily reduced the significance of home ownership. Wealth is less unequally distributed when non-marketable wealth is included in the

calculations. This is mainly because of the value of occupational pensions, which have become an increasingly important component of all wealth holdings in Britain. However, few of the poor have substantial pension rights.

Share ownership

Shares are a particularly important type of wealth, used to finance production. In Britain there has certainly been an increase in recent years in the percentage of the population who own shares. Westergaard and Resler estimated that in 1970 only 7 per cent of adults over the age of 25 owned shares. In 1995–6, according to the *Family Resources Survey*, around 16 per cent of adults in the UK owned shares.

Much of the increase in share ownership was due to the Conservative government's privatization programme, which encouraged small investors to buy shares in companies such as British Telecom and British Gas. In the 1990s share ownership was increased by the demutualization of building societies, such as the Halifax, Alliance & Leicester and Cheltenham & Gloucester, and the flotation of insurance companies such as Norwich Union. For example, around nine million people were entitled to shares as a result of the flotation of the Halifax in 1997. However, many of the new shareholders created by these flotations sold their shares very quickly. Furthermore, most new shareholders have only a very small stake in the companies in which they have invested, and in reality they may have little influence upon the way that the companies are run.

Most privately owned shares remain in the hands of a small minority of the population. Furthermore, the importance of privately held shares has declined. In 1971, 23 per cent of personal wealth was held in stocks, shares and unit trusts. This had declined to 15 per cent in 1995. On the other hand, the proportion of personal wealth held in life assurance and pension funds had increased from 15 to 34 per cent over the same period (*Social Trends*, 1997). Arguably, those who have wealth in life assurance and pension funds have even less control over how those assets are used than those who hold shares in individual companies.

Wealth taxes

Successive governments in Britain have made much less attempt to tax wealth than income. Before 1974 the main tax on wealth was estate duty, paid on the estate of someone who had died. It was easy to avoid this tax by transferring assets before death. In 1974, the Labour government introduced capital transfer tax which taxed certain gifts given by people who were alive. In 1981, the Conservative government abolished capital transfer tax and replaced it with inheritance tax. This raised the limits before which tax on wealth transfers were paid, and abolished taxes on gifts made ten years or more before someone died.

In 1986, this period was reduced to seven years and a sliding scale was introduced to determine the amount of tax paid. The longer people survived after giving assets to someone, the less tax they paid on the gift. These changes have considerably reduced the burden of taxation on the wealthy.

Classes in capitalist societies

We will now examine the changing position of particular classes within the class structure of capitalist societies, using British and American data. Three main classes – the upper class, the middle class and the working class – will be considered in turn, though as we will show, the location of the boundaries between these classes is disputed.

Most of the views dealt with in the following sections have been influenced by Marxist or Weberian theories of stratification.

The upper class

John Westergaard and Henrietta Resler – a Marxist view of the ruling class

Class divisions

In a study first published in 1975, John Westergaard and Henrietta Resler argue, essentially from a Marxist perspective, that Britain is dominated by a ruling class. They claim that the private ownership of capital provides the key to explaining class divisions.

Westergaard and Resler argue that in detail the class system is complex, but in essence it is simple: the major division is still between capital and labour. Sociologists who focus on the details of class – for example, the differences between manual and routine

white-collar workers – merely obscure the overall simplicity of the system. Such differences are insignificant compared to the wide gulf that separates the ruling class from the bulk of the wage- and salary-earning population.

Distribution of wealth

To support their argument, Westergaard and Resler point to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority, the richest 5 per cent of the population. Although there has been some change in the distribution of wealth in Britain this century, this has largely taken place within the richest 10 per cent. Some members of the ruling class have transferred property to relatives and friends to avoid death duties. The spread of home ownership has spread wealth a little more widely, but the ownership of capital in private industry has remained highly concentrated.

In 1970, as we have seen (see p. 49), only about 7 per cent of adults over 25 owned any shares, and most of those who did own shares were 'smallholders', with stock worth less than £1,000.

Ruling-class power

Westergaard and Resler argue that the maintenance of inequalities of wealth is due to the power of the ruling class. They maintain:

> *The favoured group enjoys effective power, even when its members take no active steps to exercise power. They do not need to do so – for much of the time at least – simply because things work that way in any case.*
>
> Westergaard and Resler, 1976, p. 143

It is generally taken for granted (by members of society and governments alike) that investments should bring profit and that the living standards of the propertyless should be based on the demands of the market for their skills. In general, governments have favoured the interests of capital, assuming that the well-being of the nation is largely dependent upon the prosperity of private industry.

Composition of the ruling class

Westergaard and Resler believe that the ruling class is made up of perhaps 5 per cent, and at most 10 per cent of the population. It includes the major owners of the means of production, company directors, top managers, higher professionals and senior civil servants, many of whom are large shareholders in private industry. The subordinate classes consist of the bulk of the wage- and salary-earning population.

Westergaard and Resler reject the view that the so-called separation of ownership and control in the joint stock company results in the rise of salaried managers who should properly be placed in a middle class. They argue that 'directors in general are themselves large owners of share capital' and they make the crucial decisions for companies. Like the 'absentee owners', their main concern is the maximization of profit. As such, the interests of owners and controllers are largely similar.

Westergaard and Resler put forward what is essentially a conventional Marxist view of the ruling class. They assume that the ruling class continues to exist. They claim that it is a united group which continues to dominate British society, and argue that social changes have not significantly redistributed wealth and power. These views have been challenged by New Right theorists.

Peter Saunders – a New Right view of higher classes

An influential economic elite

Peter Saunders (1990) does not deny that there is a small group of people in British society who have considerable wealth and more power than other members of society. He accepts that many directors and top managers own shares in their own and other companies, and he also accepts that there is 'an interlocking network at the top of British industry and finance in which the same names and faces keep cropping up with different hats on'. He notes that the hundred largest companies produce more than half of Britain's manufacturing output, and therefore:

> *a few thousand individuals at most are today responsible for taking the bulk of the key financial and administrative decisions which shape the future development of British industry and banking.*
>
> Saunders, 1990, p. 88

However, Saunders rejects the Marxist view that such people constitute a capitalist ruling class. He sees them as merely 'an influential economic elite'.

Wealth, ownership and the capitalist class

Saunders identifies some groups who might be seen as a capitalist class. These consist of families who continue to own majority shareholdings in established large companies, entrepreneurs who have built up and still own big businesses, and large landowners.

Such people, however, control only a small fraction of the British economy. Most businesses are run by directors and managers whose income and power derive principally from their jobs and not from their ownership of wealth. Saunders claims that less than 25 per cent of the top 250 British companies are run by managers and directors who own 5 per cent or more of the company's shares. Such people are part

As a result the skills required became minimal. As tasks were broken down, the office became like a production line for mental work. Clerical workers lost the opportunity to use their initiative and instead their work became highly regulated. The nature of the workforce changed at the same time as the work. Clerical work was increasingly feminized: by 1970, 75 per cent of clerical workers in the USA were women.

Braverman also claims that most 'service workers' have been deskilled. He says:

> *the demand for the all-round grocery clerk, fruiterer and vegetable dealer, dairyman, butcher, and so forth, has long ago been replaced by a labor configuration in the supermarkets which calls for truck unloaders, shelf stockers, checkout clerks, meat wrappers, and meat cutters; of these only the last retain any semblance of skill, and none require any general knowledge of retail trade.*
>
> Braverman, 1974, p. 371

Computerization has further reduced the skill required of checkout assistants, and the control of stock and the keeping of accounts have also become largely automated.

Braverman believes that, as a consequence of the changes outlined above, the skills required of most routine white-collar workers are now minimal. Basic numeracy and literacy are often all that are needed. With the advent of mass compulsory education, the vast majority of the population now have the necessary skills to undertake this type of work. As a result the bargaining position of these workers when they try to find work or gain promotion is little better than that of manual workers.

David Lockwood – a Weberian perspective

According to many Marxists then, the positions in the class structure occupied by most routine non-manual workers have been proletarianized. In an early study of clerks from a neo-Weberian point of view, however, David Lockwood denied that clerks had been proletarianized (Lockwood, 1958). Lockwood did not follow Weber in identifying an upper class based on the ownership of property; he did, though, use a Weberian approach to distinguish between different groups of employees. He suggested that there were three aspects of class situation. These were market situation, work situation and status situation.

1 By market situation he was referring to such factors as wages, job security and promotion prospects.
2 By work situation he meant social relationships at work between employers and managers and more junior staff; this involved consideration of how closely work was supervised.
3 By status situation he meant the degree of prestige enjoyed by particular groups of workers in society.

In terms of market situation Lockwood admitted that the wages of clerical workers began to drop below the average for skilled manual workers from the 1930s onwards. However, he claimed that in other respects clerks had retained distinct market advantages over manual workers. They had greater job security and were less likely to be laid off or made redundant. They also worked shorter hours, had more chance of being promoted to supervisory and managerial positions, and they were more likely to be given fringe benefits such as membership of a pension scheme. Some manual workers had only overtaken clerical workers in terms of pay because of the overtime they worked.

Lockwood reached similar conclusions with regard to work situation. He accepted that there had been changes – in particular the offices had grown in size – but he denied that this had led to clerical workers becoming proletarian. Compared to manual workers at that time, clerks still worked in relatively small units; they did not work on huge factory floors. Lockwood accepted that clerical work was often divided up into separate departments, but he did not believe that this had led to deskilling. He believed that the division of the clerical workforce into smaller groups with specialized roles led to closer contacts and greater cooperation between them and management. Furthermore, he claimed that attempts to make clerical work more routine had had a limited impact because clerical skills and qualifications had not been standardized. The job of each clerical worker therefore had unique elements. It was not as easy to switch clerical workers around or to replace them as it was with manual workers.

Finally, in terms of status situation Lockwood was more willing to concede a deterioration in the position of the clerical workforce. He attributed this to the rise of the modern office, mass literacy, the recruitment of growing numbers of clerical workers from manual backgrounds, and the increasing employment of female labour in these jobs. Nevertheless, he did not believe that clerical workers had an identical status to the working class. Nor did they have the same status as managers. Lockwood believed that clerks were in a position of status ambiguity which fell somewhere between the degree of status enjoyed by the middle and working classes.

Lockwood's work is now dated and it is debatable how far his claims apply to contemporary clerical work. Nevertheless, it was an important study since it established many of the issues that were to occupy later sociologists who studied clerical work.

John H. Goldthorpe – clerks as an intermediate stratum

John H. Goldthorpe *et al.* (1968) also maintained that clerical workers fell between the working class and the middle class. Like Lockwood they based their analysis on market and work situations, but they did not take account of status situation. They believed that there was an intermediate stratum sandwiched between what they referred to as the working and service classes. This intermediate stratum also included such groups as personal service workers, the self-employed, and supervisors of manual workers. The intermediate group lacked any strong class identity because of the range of occupations within it, and because many of its members become socially mobile and moved into a different class.

A. Stewart, K. Prandy and R. M. Blackburn – clerks and social mobility

Other sociologists have supported Lockwood and Goldthorpe in denying that clerical workers have become proletarian, but they have attacked the proletarianization thesis in a different way.

In a study based on a sample of male white-collar workers in firms employing over 500 people, Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn argue that individual workers in the stratification system should be distinguished from the positions that they occupy (Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn, 1980). To them, whether or not routine white-collar work has become deskilled is largely irrelevant in discussing whether the workers in these jobs have become proletarian. This is because most male clerks do not stay as clerks for all their working lives.

Stewart *et al.*'s figures indicate that only 19 per cent of those who start work as clerks are still employed in clerical work by the time that they are 30. By that age, 51 per cent have been promoted out of clerical work. For them it is merely a stepping-stone to a higher-status non-manual job. The remaining 30 per cent leave clerical work before they are 30. Stewart *et al.* claim that many of those who are promoted before they are 30 embark upon successful management careers and end up in unambiguously middle-class jobs.

According to this study, clerical work is merely an occupational category through which men pass. Stewart *et al.* argue that clerks can have varied relationships to the labour market. Young men who take clerical work as the first step in a management career can be considered middle class. Older men who change from manual work to non-manual clerical work late in their careers can more reasonably be regarded as proletarian. However, as Stewart *et al.* point out, as the latter have always been proletarian, it is senseless to see them as being proletarianized.

R. Crompton and G. Jones – a defence of the proletarianization thesis

Rosemary Crompton and Gareth Jones have strongly attacked the work of Stewart *et al.* (Crompton and Jones, 1984). Crompton and Jones studied 887 white-collar employees in three large bureaucracies: a local authority, a life assurance company, and a major bank. They advance four main arguments to undermine the conclusions of Stewart *et al.*:

1 They point out that the study by Stewart *et al.* ignored female white-collar workers. In their own sample, a large majority of clerical workers – 70 per cent – were female. Furthermore, they found that female clerical workers were much less likely to achieve promotion than their male counterparts. Crompton and Jones found that 82 per cent of female white-collar workers in their sample were on clerical grades, compared to 30 per cent of men. Only 12 per cent of female workers had reached supervisory level and 1 per cent managerial positions, while the equivalent figures for men were 36 per cent and 34 per cent. Thus, the high rates of male upward social mobility out of clerical work were at the expense of the large number of female workers who were left behind. They argue that even if male clerical workers cannot be considered proletarian because of their upward mobility, this is not true of female clerks.

2 Crompton and Jones point out that the high rates of upward mobility for men in the study by Stewart *et al.* depended not only on the immobility of women, but also on the 30 per cent of male clerks who left this type of employment. Crompton and Jones suggest that in the future it will not necessarily be the case that male clerks will be able to enjoy so much upward mobility. If the number of managerial jobs does not continue expanding, more and more men may become trapped in the way that female clerks already are.

3 Crompton and Jones question the view that promotion to managerial and administrative jobs necessarily represents genuine upward mobility. On the basis of their own study they claim that many managerial and administrative jobs have become increasingly routine and require little use of initiative. They claim that employers use the grade structure to encourage loyalty and dedication from employees, but in reality many of the lower-level management and administrative jobs are little different from clerical work. Promotion might not necessarily represent a change in class position for all white-collar workers.

4 Crompton and Jones suggest that Stewart *et al.* ignored one of the central issues in the proletarianization debate, that is, whether clerical work had actually been deskilled. Crompton and Jones disagree that class consists only of people, and has nothing to do with places in the stratification

system. They say 'classes can be conceived of as sets of places within the social division of labour'. If the places occupied by clerical workers have lost their advantages over working-class jobs, then clerks can be considered proletarian.

Crompton and Jones carried out detailed investigations of the three institutions they studied and found strong evidence that proletarianization had taken place. Some 91 per cent of their sample of clerical workers did not exercise any control over how they worked: they simply followed a set of routines without using their initiative. As a result their work required very little skill. Deskilling appeared to be closely linked to computerization: least skill was required by the clerks at the most computerized of the institutions, the local authority.

Crompton and Jones concluded that clerical workers were a white-collar proletariat, and that female clerical workers in particular have little chance of promotion to what could be called middle-class or service-class jobs.

G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Vogler – clerks and personal service workers

In a more recent contribution to the debate, Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler (1988; see also Marshall, 1997) have rejected Crompton and Jones's view that clerical work has been deskilled. Marshall *et al.* do accept, though, that personal service workers such as shop-assistants, check-out and wrap operators, and receptionists are little different from the working class. Their evidence is based on structured interviews carried out with a sample of 1,770 British men and women.

In one of their questions they asked respondents whether their job required more, less or the same skill as when they had started work. Overall only 4 per cent claimed that their jobs required less skill, and only 4 per cent of women in lower-grade white-collar jobs claimed to have been deskilled. No men in the latter type of job claimed that skill requirements had gone down. Workers were also questioned about such issues as whether they could design and plan important parts of their work, decide on day-to-day tasks, and decide the amount and pace of their work.

From this evidence Marshall *et al.* also conclude that clerical work has not been proletarianized. They support the views of Goldthorpe and Lockwood that clerical workers are in an intermediate class between the working and service classes.

They did, however, find that personal service workers tended to give different answers to the questions about autonomy at work. For example, 80 per cent of female personal service workers said they could not design and plan important parts of their work; 96 per cent said they could not decide their starting and finishing times; and 63 per cent said they could not initiate new tasks during their work. Marshall *et al.* conclude that personal service workers are 'more or less indistinguishable' from the working class.

The work of Marshall *et al.* draws attention to the position of personal service workers in the stratification system. Compared to clerical workers, they have been a somewhat neglected part of the workforce in stratification research. Certainly it is hard to see how it is possible to regard, for example, check-out assistants as middle class given their low wages, working conditions, and lack of autonomy.

Marshall *et al.*'s rejection of the proletarianization theory for clerical workers must, however, be regarded with some caution. In particular, the significance of the small number who say their work has been deskilled is open to question. The deskilling argument as advanced by Braverman refers to a time-span of a century or more, stretching back far earlier than the experience of those currently employed in such jobs. Indeed, Marshall *et al.* themselves admit that 'a definitive answer to the question of job techniques and job autonomy could be provided only by systematic and direct observation over a prolonged period of time'.

Middle class, or middle classes?

As we have seen, there is no agreement among sociologists about the position of the middle class, or classes, in the stratification system. They are divided about which non-manual workers should be placed in the middle class, and disagree about whether the middle class is a united and homogeneous, or divided and heterogeneous group.

Anthony Giddens – the middle class

The simplest position is taken by Anthony Giddens (1973). He argues that there is a single middle class, based on the possession of 'recognised skills – including educational qualifications'. Unlike the members of the working class, who can sell only their manual labour power, members of the middle class can also sell their mental labour power. Giddens

distinguishes the middle class from the upper class because the middle class does not own 'property in the means of production' and so has to work for others to earn a living.

John H. Goldthorpe – the service and intermediate classes

Giddens follows Weber's views quite closely, but other neo-Weberians do not agree that there is a single middle class. John Goldthorpe, in his early work (Goldthorpe, 1980, and Goldthorpe, Llewellyn and Payne, 1987), defines class in terms of market and work situation, but in his research does not follow Weber in distinguishing the propertied from the propertyless. Goldthorpe does not therefore clearly distinguish an upper class, nor does he claim that there is a united middle class. As Figure 2.6 (on p. 115) shows, Goldthorpe sees the highest class as the service class, and this includes large proprietors as well as administrators, managers and professionals. This class itself is internally divided between those in upper and lower positions. However, he sees no significant division between managers and professionals within the service class.

Goldthorpe's class in the middle is not called the middle class, but the intermediate class. It includes clerical workers, personal service workers, small proprietors and lower-grade technicians. To Goldthorpe these workers have poorer market and work situations than the service class. In his scheme this class is also seen as being internally divided, but nevertheless at the most basic level he sees what is normally regarded as the middle class as being split in two. (For further details of Goldthorpe's views see pp. 114–15.)

In his later work, Goldthorpe (1995) has changed tack and argues that there is a primary division between different sections of the middle class based on employment status. That is, the employed, employees and the self-employed are in different positions. Beyond that, there are secondary divisions based on different employee relationships and it is these, rather than the nature of the work tasks that they do, that distinguishes classes. What makes the service class distinctive is that it not only receives a salary but is also provided with increments, pension rights, and career development opportunities.

Goldthorpe's views are controversial. In particular, many sociologists argue, in contradiction to both of Goldthorpe's approaches, that there is a significant division between professionals and managers in Goldthorpe's service class (for example, Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding, 1992). A further problem is that Goldthorpe himself admits that, strictly speaking, large employers should be seen as a separate category from the service class employees. However, in his social mobility research, for example, he incorporates large employers into his category of the service class because the group is so small. He accepts that this 'means introducing some, though in all probability only a quite small, degree of error'.

K. Roberts, F. G. Cook, S. C. Clark and E. Semeonoff – the fragmented middle class

Some sociologists see the middle class as being even more divided than Goldthorpe does.

From a study of images of class, Roberts, Cook, Clark and Semeonoff claim that 'the middle classes are being splintered' (Roberts *et al.*, 1977). They argue that the middle class is becoming increasingly divided into a number of different strata, each with a distinctive view of its place in the stratification system. Roberts *et al.* base these observations on a survey conducted in 1972, of the class images of a sample of 243 male white-collar workers. They found a number of different images of class. Below are the four most common:

1 Some 27 per cent of the white-collar sample had a middle-mass image of society. They saw themselves as part of a middle class made up of the bulk of the working population. This middle mass lay between a small, rich and powerful upper class and a small, relatively impoverished, lower class. No division was drawn between most manual and non-manual workers, and within the large central class 'no basic ideological cleavages, divisions of interest or contrasts in life-styles' were recognized. Those who held a middle-mass image of society were likely to be in the middle-range income bracket for white-collar workers.

2 The second most common image, held by 19 per cent of the sample, was that of a compressed middle class. Those who subscribed to this view saw themselves as members of a narrow stratum squeezed between two increasingly powerful classes. Below them, the bulk of the population formed a working class and above them was a small upper class. Small business people typically held this compressed middle-class image. They felt threatened by what they saw as an increasingly powerful and organized working class, and by government and big business which showed little inclination to support them.

3 A third group of white-collar workers saw society in terms of a finely graded ladder containing four or more strata. Although this is assumed to be the typical middle-class image of society, it was subscribed to by only 15 per cent of the sample. Those who saw society in these terms tended to be well educated, with professional qualifications, and relatively highly paid. Though they described

themselves as middle class, they indicated no apparent class loyalty and often rejected the whole principle of social class.

4 Finally, 14 per cent of the white-collar sample held a proletarian image of society. They defined themselves as working class and located themselves in what they saw as the largest class at the base of the stratification system. They saw themselves as having more in common with manual workers than with top management and higher professionals. Those who held a proletarian image were usually employed in routine white-collar occupations with few promotion prospects and relatively low wages.

The wide variation in white-collar class imagery leads Roberts *et al.* to conclude that not only is the middle class fragmented but social trends will make it even more so in the future. The middle classes will come to form separate and distinctive strata in the stratification system.

The diversity of class images, market situations, market strategies and interests within the white-collar group suggests that the middle class is becoming increasingly fragmented. Indeed, the proposition that white-collar groups form a single social class is debatable.

Criticisms of Roberts *et al.*

The work of Roberts *et al.* can be criticized for relying on subjective class images. Neo-Weberians such as Goldthorpe (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1987) prefer to analyse class in terms of market and work situation, while neo-Marxists such as the Ehrenreichs (1979) advocate a discussion of the function that different strata perform for capitalism. For most Marxists it is the places in the stratification system (which are produced by the economic system) that are important in defining class, and not the individuals who occupy those places. For some Marxists this leads to the conclusion that the middle class is split in two.

Writers such as Crompton and Jones (1984) Braverman (1974) and the Ehrenreichs (1979) all agree that routine white-collar work has been deskilled and proletarianized. These workers do not have any stake in owning the means of production; they have little autonomy or responsibility at work; and they have lower wages than many members of the working class.

The upper reaches of what is usually referred to as the middle class, are, however, much closer to the bourgeoisie. They are unproductive labourers who do not produce wealth, but carry out important functions for capitalists. For example, managers play a vital role in controlling the workforce. Marxists and neo-Marxists disagree about the extent of their independence from the bourgeoisie. Braverman believes that they have little independence, while the Ehrenreichs claim that the professional-managerial class has increasingly come to defend its own interests rather than those of the ruling class.

N. Abercrombie and J. Urry – the polarizing middle class

In a review of debates about the middle class, Nicholas Abercrombie and John Urry argue that both Marxist and Weberian theories of stratification are useful, and that the two approaches can be combined (Abercrombie and Urry 1983). To Abercrombie and Urry, classes consist both of individuals, or people, and the places that they occupy.

They disagree with Marxists who argue that the capitalist economic system automatically produces certain types of job with particular functions, since they point out that groups of workers can organize to try to protect their work. Professional workers have thus been quite successful in retaining their independence and work responsibilities, whereas clerical workers have not. The result has been to split the middle class in two.

In terms of the Marxist concept of functions performed, and also in terms of the Weberian concepts of market and work situations, there is a major division between managers and professionals on the one hand, and routine white-collar workers on the other. According to Abercrombie and Urry, whether a Marxist *or* a Weberian theory of class is used, one section of the middle class has moved closer to the upper class, while the other has more or less become proletarian. In between, the so-called 'middle class' is hard to find.

Mike Savage, James Barlow, Peter Dickens and Tony Fielding – *Property, Bureaucracy and Culture*

Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding (1992) follow many other theories by claiming that the middle class is not a united group. However, they do not argue that this lack of unity is inevitable, nor that the divisions within the middle class always stay the same. For example, they believe that France has tended to have a more united service class (of managers and professionals) than Britain. Furthermore, they believe that the nature of divisions in the British middle class may have been changing in recent times.

Savage *et al.* distinguish groups in the middle class according to the types of assets that they possess, rather than in terms of a hierarchy according to their seniority in the class structure. The importance of these different groups can change

over time and is affected by the particular circumstances in which classes are formed. Thus, for example, in one set of circumstances, professionals might form a more cohesive and influential class than managers; at another time in another place the reverse might be true.

Social classes

Savage *et al.* see social classes as 'social collectivities rooted in particular types of exploitative relationships'. These social collectivities are 'groups of people with shared levels of income and remuneration, lifestyles, cultures, political orientations and so forth'. As collectivities they may engage in social action that will affect how societies develop. However, to do this they have to actively form themselves into classes. Class formation does not automatically follow from social divisions. Savage *et al.* therefore examine how class formation has developed in the middle classes.

They point out, though, that there are many social collectivities with, for example, a shared lifestyle. What makes class distinctive is that it is based around exploitative relationships in which some people become better off at the expense of others. These may take place through wage labour (as in Marxist theory), but exploitation can also be found outside the workplace. One example is where a person's contribution to an activity is neither recognized nor rewarded. They illustrate this with the case of a male academic who relies on his wife to type his manuscript or do the housework so that he can get on with writing. He gives her no share of the royalties and no acknowledgement as a co-author. Savage *et al.* say, 'her labour has been "deleted"'.

Classes and types of asset

The three types of asset which give the middle classes their advantaged life chances are: property assets, organizational assets and cultural assets. Individuals may have some combination of these three types of asset, but distinctive middle classes can develop based on each type. Different types of asset have different qualities and provide different possibilities for exploitation.

1 The propertied middle class are those who have property assets. This group consists of the 'petit bourgeoisie', which includes the self-employed and small employers. Their property assets are not as great as those of the 'dominant class' made up of landowners, financiers and capitalists. Property assets are most easily passed down from generation to generation. They can be stored in the form of various types of capital or in other possessions such as property. Property assets are the most 'robust in conveying exploitative potential'. As Marxist theory claims, you can use capital to hire and exploit the labour of others by not giving them the full value of their labour.

2 Organizational assets stem from holding positions in large bureaucratic organizations. These assets are held by managers. In the past a considerable number of people gained organizational assets by working their way up a bureaucratic hierarchy in a company without necessarily having high educational qualifications. Organizational assets are the most fragile type of asset. They cannot be stored and it may be very difficult to pass them down to the next generation. Certainly, today, managers are unlikely to be able to ensure that their children also obtain jobs as managers. In some cases, the assets are specific to a single organization and cannot readily be transferred to another company if the employee tries to move job. On the other hand, employment in organizations does provide opportunities for exploiting the labour of others.

3 Cultural assets derive partly from educational attainment and credentials. These sorts of cultural asset are particularly important to professional workers. However, they can also take the form of class taste. They can be found in 'what Bourdieu calls the habitus, or set of internalised dispositions which govern people's behaviour. Cultural assets are stored physically in people's bodies and minds: the body itself materialises class tastes. They can be reproduced through the passing on of cultural tastes to offspring.'

Class taste can be important in gaining educational qualifications (see the discussion of Bourdieu's concept of 'cultural capital', in Chapter 11). Women play a key role here because of their prevalence in the teaching profession and their importance in the provision of childcare. Cultural assets, however, cannot be used to directly exploit the labour of others. For this to happen they have to be used to accumulate property assets or to achieve positions which bring with them organizational assets.

Different sections of the middle class will tend to try to use their assets to gain other assets that will make their position secure, and enable them to exploit other workers and pass down their advantages to their children. So, for example, the cultured will try to obtain good jobs or use their cultural assets to start their own businesses. Managers who have worked their way up in a company may try to gain educational qualifications so they have the option of applying for jobs in other companies. Owners of successful small businesses may pay for a private education for their children in the hope that they will acquire cultural assets.

Historical middle-class formation in Britain

According to Savage *et al.*, these three sections of the middle class in Britain have all enjoyed different degrees of success at different times.

The *petit bourgeoisie* were of little importance in rural parts of Britain after the enclosure of land and the Industrial Revolution. Most of the land was owned by big landowners, with others reduced to landless labourers. In the towns, however, the *petit bourgeoisie* were more important, with shopkeepers and private landlords being particularly prominent. They were distinctive in their attitudes and lifestyles, partly because they tended to oppose the kinds of government expenditure that were welcomed by the professional middle class. Because of the nature of their assets it was relatively easy for them to pass them on to their children.

The professions have been a particularly successful group in the development of British society. The state played a crucial role in establishing an education system that formalized qualifications, from quite early on. It has also employed many professionals or defined the terms under which they could operate.

Professional associations have tended to link membership of professions closely with cultural assets by ensuring that a general liberal education was a prerequisite for a professional training. The professions have therefore had a high level of self-recruitment, with most new professionals coming from professional backgrounds.

In Britain the distinction between professionals and managers has been quite strong. Managers have generally been in a weaker position than professionals. Although their pay has been quite high, they have, until recently, relied very much on internal promotions within companies and have had little chance to switch between employers to further their careers. Levels of self-recruitment have not been so high and managers have not formed as cohesive a class as professionals.

Contemporary class formation in the British middle class

Savage *et al.* claim to have detected some significant changes in the middle class in contemporary Britain. The emphasis on controlling or reducing public expenditure by successive governments, and the increased stress on market forces, have tended to weaken the position of public sector professionals. There have also been important changes in industry. Savage *et al.* support the view that industry has moved in the direction of becoming post-Fordist. This involves moving away from mass production in very large hierarchical firms and instead producing smaller batches of more specialized products in less hierarchical and more flexible firms. (See Chapter 10 for a discussion of post-Fordism.) In the process, firms have come to rely more upon self-employed consultants of various types.

Particularly important are professionals and others working in areas such as advertising and marketing. They play an important role in 'defining and perpetuating consumer cultures associated with private commodity production'. Their cultural capital is not legitimated so much by qualifications and by employment by the state, as by their ability to make money by tapping into consumer tastes. Managers have become even less of a cohesive grouping than they once were. The internal labour markets of companies have become less important for promotion prospects. Managers have tried to cement their position by gaining greater cultural assets such as educational qualifications. These make them less reliant on single companies.

Savage *et al.* claim, on the basis of such arguments, that there is a new division in the British middle classes between:

> *a public sector, professional, increasingly female, middle class on the one hand, opposed to an entrepreneurial, private sector, propertied middle class on the other. This latter group might include the self-employed, some managerial groupings and the private sector professionals.*
>
> *Historically, we have argued, the professional middle class lorded over the rest: today managerial and private sector professionals may be shifting from its sphere of influence and may be joining the previously marginalised petit bourgeoisie in a more amorphous and increasingly influential private sector middle class.*
>
> Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding, 1992, p. 218

The culture and lifestyles of the middle classes

Using data from 1988 survey research from the British Market Research Bureau, Savage *et al.* claim to have detected cultural differences between these new middle-class groupings. However, they distinguish three lifestyle groups rather than two. The public sector professionals – such as those working in health and education and social workers, who are described as 'people with cultural asset, but not much money' – were found to have 'an ascetic lifestyle founded on health and exercise'. They drank less alcohol than the middle class as a whole and were heavily involved in sports such as hiking, skating and climbing.

On the other hand, the rather better paid 'private sector professionals and specialists' had a 'post-modern' lifestyle. This involved an appreciation of high art and of pop culture, and a combination of extravagance and concern for health and fitness. Thus 'appreciation of high cultural forms of art such as opera and classical music exists cheek by jowl

with an interest in disco dancing or stock car racing ... a binge in an expensive restaurant one day might be followed by a diet the next'. This lifestyle was 'post-modern' because it rejected traditional cultural values about the worthiness of different types of art, and because it drew on consumer culture and its willingness to combine a wide variety of images and lifestyles (see pp. 119–22 for a discussion of post-modernism). A third group, consisting largely of managers and civil servants, is described as having an undistinctive lifestyle.

If Savage *et al.* are right, then the middle classes remain divided, but the nature of those divisions has changed significantly over recent decades. These changes have been influenced by the policies of the British state, and the middle classes have also exercised greater choice in deciding to adopt different lifestyles.

Evaluation

The work of Savage *et al.* does highlight some important divisions within the middle class. It provides a useful analysis of the basis of middle-class life chances. It does not fall into the trap of assuming that class divisions are static, and rightly emphasizes the active role of groups in developing their own class identities. It does concentrate, however, on the higher reaches of the middle class – their theory does not explain the position of routine white-collar workers.

Furthermore, it could be argued that their analysis of contemporary divisions in the middle class is not entirely convincing. Senior managers could be seen as forming an increasingly powerful and influential group in Britain, who may have combined the acquisition of qualifications with gaining increased opportunities for movement between companies. For example, those with MBA (Master of Business Administration) qualifications, particularly from the most prestigious business schools, may find it easier to gain and move between powerful and highly paid jobs. In a later work, Savage and Butler (1995) do admit that some senior managerial groups may have benefited from recent changes. They say 'it seems likely that the most senior managers of large organizations actually have enhanced powers. Such senior managers are also increasingly likely to be significant property owners of their organizations, through devices such as share options.' They speculate that such managers may have professional backgrounds and they are increasingly forming 'a small cadre who can mobilize organization, property and cultural assets simultaneously'.

The characterization of the lifestyle of different groups does seem to be based on rather simplified generalizations. For example, there are plenty of teachers and doctors who drink large amounts of alcohol and who are interested in popular culture. There are also plenty of private sector professionals who have a particular interest in health and fitness. If some theorists of postmodernism are correct, lifestyles are becoming less associated with particular class groupings in any case.

The working class

The market situation of manual workers

In official statistics based upon the Registrar-General's scale, and in most occupational classifications, the working class is usually regarded as consisting of manual workers. As we saw previously (see p. 57), there are important differences between manual and non-manual workers:

1 Non-manual workers, on average, receive higher wages than their manual counterparts.

2 A second market advantage of white-collar workers concerns the differences in income careers between manual and non-manual employees. The wages of manual workers typically rise gradually during their twenties, peak in their early thirties, and then slowly but steadily fall. By comparison, the earnings of many white-collar workers continue to rise during most of their working lives. Manual workers have relatively few opportunities for promotion and their pay structure is unlikely to include incremental increases.

3 A third white-collar market advantage involves security of earnings and employment: compared to non-manual workers, manual workers have a greater risk of redundancy, unemployment, lay-offs, and short-time working.

4 Finally, the gross weekly earnings of white- and blue-collar workers do not reveal the economic value of fringe benefits. Such benefits include company pension schemes, paid sick leave, the use of company cars, and meals and entertainment which are paid for in part or in total by the employer.

Life chances

The inferior market situation of manual workers is also reflected in their inferior life chances. A variety of studies show that, compared with non-manual

workers, they die younger and are more likely to suffer from poor health; they are less likely to own their own homes and a variety of consumer goods; they are more likely to be convicted of a criminal offence; and their children are less likely to stay on at school after the age of 16 to achieve educational qualifications, or to go on to higher education. In short, compared to non-manual workers, manual workers have less chance of experiencing those things defined as desirable in Western societies, but more chance of experiencing undesirable things.

Class and lifestyle

The above evidence suggests that manual workers form at least part of the working class in Britain. As previous sections have indicated, some sociologists – particularly those influenced by Marxism – would also include routine non-manual workers in the working class. However, many sociologists argue that social class involves more than a similar market situation and similar life chances.

In order to become a social class, a collection of similarly placed individuals must, to some degree, form a social group. This involves at least a minimal awareness of group identity, and some appreciation of and commitment to common interests. It also involves some similarity of lifestyle. Members of a social group usually share certain norms, values and attitudes that distinguish them from other members of society. Finally, belonging to a social group usually means that a member will interact primarily with other members of that group.

We will now analyse manual workers in terms of these criteria for class formation.

Class identity

A number of studies conducted in Britain over the past 30 years have revealed that the vast majority of the population believes that society is divided into social classes. These studies show that most manual workers describe themselves as working class, and most white-collar workers see themselves as middle class. For example, in a study by Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler (1988), 60 per cent of respondents said they thought of themselves as belonging to a particular class, and 90 per cent could assign themselves to a class category (see pp. 84–5 for further details of this study).

However, there are a number of problems with this type of evidence. Because people identify with a class does not necessarily mean that they will act in ways consistent with that identification. In addition, the labels 'middle and working class' may mean different things to different people.

In a survey conducted in 1950, F. M. Martin (1954) found that 70 per cent of manual workers regarded themselves as working class. The remaining 30 per cent, who defined themselves as middle class, did so partly because of the meanings they attached to the term working class. They saw the working class as a group bordering on poverty and defined its members as lazy and irresponsible; hence their desire to dissociate themselves from this classification.

However, despite the above problems, the fact that most manual workers define themselves as working class indicates at least a minimal awareness of class identity.

Class subcultures

From his observations of the working class in nineteenth-century England, Freidrich Engels wrote: 'the workers speak other dialects, have other thoughts and ideals, other customs and moral principles, a different religion and other politics than those of the bourgeoisie. Thus they are two radically dissimilar nations.'

Few, if any, sociologists would suggest that the gulf between the classes is as great today. Many, though, would argue that the norms, values and attitudes of the working and middle classes differ to some degree. They would therefore feel justified in talking about working-class subculture and middle-class subculture. As a result it has been argued that manual and non-manual workers form social groups distinguished by relatively distinct subcultures.

The proletarian traditionalist

Sociologists have long been aware of variations in working-class subcultures. Members of the working class have never had identical lifestyles. Nevertheless, a number of sociologists have identified characteristics that have been seen as typical of the traditional working class. Basing his ideas on classic studies of working-class communities, David Lockwood (1966) described the subculture of one working-class group, the proletarian traditionalists. When sociologists try to determine the extent to which the working class might have changed, they tend to make comparisons with the proletarian traditionalist.

The proletarian traditionalist lives in close-knit working-class communities and is employed in long-established industries such as mining, docking and shipbuilding. Such industries tend to concentrate workers together in communities dominated by a single occupational group. These communities are relatively isolated from the wider society. Consequently, they tend to produce a strong sense of belonging and solidarity. The workers are very loyal to their workmates and 'a strong sense of shared occupational experiences make for feelings of fraternity and comradeship'.

Friendship with workmates extends into leisure activities. Workmates are often neighbours and relatives as well. They spend much of their leisure time together in pubs and working men's clubs. There is little geographical and social mobility, so the sense of belonging to a community is reinforced. The strong social networks 'emphasise mutual aid in everyday life and the obligation to join in the gregarious pattern of leisure'.

The proletarian traditionalist is not an individualist. Lockwood describes 'a public and present-oriented conviviality' which 'eschews individual striving "to be different"'. Unlike the middle class, proletarian traditionalists do not pursue individual achievement by trying to gain promotion at work or success in running their own businesses. Instead they identify strongly with the pursuit of collective goals. This is often expressed through strong loyalty to a trades union. This loyalty comes from an emotional attachment to the organization rather than from a calculation of the benefits that union membership might bring.

The proletarian traditionalist's attitude to life tends to be fatalistic. From this perspective there is little individuals can do to alter their situation, and changes or improvements in their circumstances are largely due to luck or fate. In view of this, life must be accepted as it comes. Since there is little chance of individual effort changing the future, long-term planning is discouraged in favour of present-time orientation. There is a tendency to live from day to day and planning is limited to the near future. As a result, there is an emphasis on immediate gratification. There is little pressure to sacrifice pleasures of the moment for future rewards; desires are to be gratified in the present rather than at a later date. This attitude to life may be summarized by the following everyday phrases: 'what will be will be', 'take life as it comes', 'make the best of it', 'live for today because tomorrow may never come.'

By comparison, middle-class subculture is characterized by a purposive approach to life; humanity has control over its destiny and, with ability, determination and ambition, can change and improve its situation. Associated with this attitude is an emphasis on future-time orientation and deferred gratification. Long-term planning and deferring or putting off present pleasures for future rewards are regarded as worthwhile. Thus individuals are encouraged to sacrifice money and/or leisure at certain stages of their lives to improve career prospects.

Images and models of class

In addition to particular values and attitudes, members of society usually have a general image or picture of the social structure and the class system. These pictures are known as images of society or, more particularly, images of class.

The proletarian traditionalist tends to perceive the social order as sharply divided into 'us' and 'them'. On one side are the bosses, managers and white-collar workers who have power, and on the other, the relatively powerless manual workers. There is seen to be little opportunity for individual members of the working class to cross the divide separating them from the rest of society.

This view of society is referred to as a power model. Research has indicated that traditional workers may hold other images of society and their perceptions of the social order are not as simple and clearcut as the above description suggests. However, the power model appears to be the nearest thing to a consistent image of society held by a significant number of traditional workers.

By comparison, the middle-class image of society resembles a ladder. There are various strata or levels differentiated in terms of occupational status and lifestyles of varying prestige. Given ability and ambition, opportunities are available for individuals to rise in the social hierarchy. This view of the social order is known as a status or prestige model.

The above account of proletarian traditionalists is largely based on a description of men. Working-class communities have usually been seen as having strongly segregated gender roles. Husbands have been regarded as the main breadwinners while wives have retained responsibility for childcare and housework. Husbands and wives tend to spend leisure time apart. While the men mix with their work colleagues, women associate more with female relatives. The bond between mother and daughter is particularly strong. (For an example of a detailed description of gender roles in a traditional working-class community see Chapter 8.)

The description is also one which has been applied largely to white men rather than to members of ethnic minorities.

Marxism and the working class

Marxist sociologists have tended to support the view that there is a distinctive working class which is distinguished by its non-ownership of the means of production and its role in providing manual labour power for the ruling class. Marxists also tend to see the working class as a social group with a distinctive subculture and at least some degree of class consciousness.

Marx himself predicted that the working class would become increasingly homogeneous: its members would become more and more similar to one another. He assumed that technical developments in industry would remove the need for manual skills.

As a result craftspeople and tradespeople would steadily disappear and the bulk of the working class would become unskilled machine minders. The growing similarity of wages and circumstances would increase working-class solidarity. Marx argued:

> *The interests and life situations of the proletariat are more and more equalized, since the machinery increasingly obliterates the differences of labour and depresses the wage almost everywhere to an equally low level.*
>
> Marx and Engels, 1950, p. 40

Marx thought that, as a consequence, members of the working class would be drawn closer together and would eventually form a revolutionary force which would overthrow capitalism and replace it with communism. There have been several revolutionary movements in capitalist industrial societies, but none have come close to success.

Changes in the working class

Some sociologists now believe that the working class has undergone changes during the twentieth century that have weakened and divided it, reducing its distinctiveness from the middle class, and removing the potential for the development of class consciousness. One of the most obvious changes is the shrinking size of the working class if it is defined as consisting of manual workers. According to Routh, manual workers declined from 79 per cent of those in employment in 1911, to just under half in 1971 (Routh, 1980).

A somewhat different impression is provided by the *General Household Survey*, a survey carried out regularly by the British government. This uses slightly different categories from the manual/non-manual division, including personal service workers and self-employed non-professional workers with manual workers. On this basis 47 per cent of the population were found to be in the working class in 1994, compared to 55 per cent in 1975 (see Table 2.2, p. 41).

In part, this decline has been due to de-industrialization as manufacturing industry employs a decreasing percentage of the workforce. Between 1966 and 1997, the number of people employed in manufacturing in Great Britain fell from 8.6 to 4 million. In 1997, only around 18 per cent of those in employment had jobs in manufacturing. If all jobs in construction and production are combined, they still only represented about 23 per cent of those employed in 1997 (*Labour Market Trends*, 1997).

Employment has fallen particularly rapidly in those jobs most likely to produce the subculture of the traditional proletarian worker. Heavy industries such as coalmining, shipbuilding and the steel industry, in which employees tend to live close together in occupational communities, have declined. In 1947 there were 740,000 British miners; by 1997 just 56,500 were employed in the mining and quarrying of all energy-producing materials, and the numbers have fallen since then (Beynon, 1992 and *Labour Market Trends*, 1997).

Recent declines in manufacturing employment have gone beyond the traditional heavy industries. As Huw Beynon points out, 'the car workers, it seems have gone the way of miners; as have the shipyard workers, the steel workers and those men ... who in mechanical engineering factories supplied components for the consumer industries'. In 1992 there were more people employed in hotel and catering than in steel, shipyards, cars, mechanical engineering and coal combined.

The new industrial jobs tend to be concentrated in the electronics industries located in such areas as 'silicon glen' in Scotland, East Anglia, the M4 corridor and South Wales. These changes have been accompanied by a major shift in the proportions of men and women employed in manufacturing. Beynon describes the 'rise of industries based upon information technology, in which women play a central part: they manufacture the microchip in factories in the Far East and they assemble the computer boards in the lowlands of Scotland'.

The end of the industrial worker?

Although he accepts that industrial work has changed a great deal and declined significantly, Beynon argues that we are far from witnessing the 'end of the industrial worker' or the demise of the working class. He argues that the decline of industrial work may be exaggerated, for a number of reasons:

1 Many manufacturing jobs have not disappeared, they have simply been moved abroad to take advantage of cheaper labour costs. In countries such as Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia, South Korea and China, manufacturing employment has risen rapidly since the war. Manufacturing employment in Britain is also low compared to most other advanced industrial capitalist countries because of 'a competitively weak industrial structure and the economic policies followed in the UK in the 1980s'.

2 Many jobs which are classified as being in the service sector are involved in producing things, and the distinction between manufacturing and services is therefore somewhat artificial. For example, workers at McDonald's are mainly involved in 'distinctly manual, repetitive and unpleasant work'. Cooking beefburgers is as much a manual task as assembling motor cars, yet it is not classified as such.

3 Some jobs have been redefined as belonging to the service sector because of changes in who employs

the workers rather than changes in the nature of the work. For example, at companies like Nissan, jobs such as cleaning have been subcontracted out to independent companies. As a result they are no longer defined as manufacturing jobs.

Beynon concludes that there are still very substantial numbers of workers involved in manufacturing and it cannot be argued that the industrial worker is disappearing.

Living standards and splits in the working class

Although the number of manual workers has declined, average living standards for manual workers in regular employment have improved. According to government figures, net income after housing costs for individuals rose by about 80 per cent between 1971 and 1990, and, while economic growth has levelled off in most years since then, there was a record growth of 2.2 per cent in 1995 (*Social Trends*, 1997). The better-paid groups of manual workers were among the beneficiaries of this general rise in living standards.

As early as the 1960s, some commentators were arguing that rising living standards were creating a new group of affluent members of the working class who had started acting like members of the middle class. Affluent manual workers were seen as developing a privatized home-based lifestyle and as becoming more concerned with purchasing consumer goods than with showing solidarity with their workmates. A recent variation on this theme suggests that home ownership, particularly among former council house tenants, has transformed the attitudes and values of some sections of the working class.

Some sociologists do not accept that affluent manual workers have become middle class, nor that they have developed a more privatized lifestyle, but they do believe that the working class is increasingly split into different groups. Workers with different degrees of skill, and those belonging to particular trades, are more concerned with protecting their own interests than they are with making common cause with the working class as a whole. To some, members of the working class have become interested primarily in the size of their wage packets, and they have little potential for developing class consciousness. We will now examine these views in more detail.

Embourgeoisement

Writing in the nineteenth century, Marx predicted that the intermediate stratum would be depressed into the proletariat. During the 1950s and early 1960s, a number of sociologists suggested that just the opposite was happening. They claimed that a process of embourgeoisement was occurring whereby increasing numbers of manual workers were entering the middle stratum and becoming middle class.

During the 1950s there was a general increase in prosperity in advanced industrial societies and, in particular, among a growing number of manual workers whose earnings now fell within the white-collar range. These highly-paid, affluent workers were seen as increasingly typical of manual workers.

This development, coupled with studies that suggested that poverty was rapidly disappearing, led to the belief that the shape of the stratification system was being transformed. From the triangle or pyramid shape of the nineteenth century (with a large and relatively impoverished working class at the bottom and a small wealthy group at the top), many now argued that the stratification system was changing to a diamond or pentagon shape, with an increasing proportion of the population falling into the middle range. In this middle-mass society, the mass of the population was middle- rather than working-class.

Economic determinism

The theory used to explain this presumed development was a version of economic determinism. It was argued that the demands of modern technology and an advanced industrial economy determined the shape of the stratification system.

For instance, the American sociologist Clark Kerr (Kerr *et al.* 1962) claimed that advanced industrialism requires an increasingly highly educated, trained and skilled workforce which, in turn, leads to higher pay and higher status occupations. In particular, skilled technicians are rapidly replacing unskilled machine minders.

Jessie Bernard (1957) argued that working-class affluence is related to the needs of an industrial economy for a mass market. In order to expand, industry requires a large market for its products. Mass consumption has been made possible by high wages which, in turn, have been made possible because large sectors of modern industry have relatively low labour costs and high productivity. Bernard claimed that there is a rapidly growing

middle market which reflects the increased purchasing power of affluent manual workers. Home ownership and consumer durables such as washing machines, refrigerators, televisions and cars are no longer the preserve of white-collar workers. With reference to the class system, Bernard states:

> *The 'proletariat' has not absorbed the middle class but rather the other way round. In the sense that the class structure here described reflects modern technology, it vindicates the Marxist thesis that social organization is 'determined' by technological forces.*
>
> Quoted in Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1969, p. 9.

Thus Bernard suggests that Marx was correct in emphasizing the importance of economic factors but wrong in his prediction of the direction of social change.

The supporters of embourgeoisement argued that middle-range incomes led to middle-class lifestyles. It was assumed that the affluent worker was adopting middle-class norms, values and attitudes. For example, in Britain, it was believed that affluence eroded traditional political party loyalties and that increasing numbers of manual workers were now supporting the Conservative Party.

The process of embourgeoisement was seen to be accelerated by the demands of modern industry for a mobile labour force. This tended to break up traditional close-knit working-class communities found in the older industrial areas. The geographically mobile, affluent workers moved to newer, suburban areas where they were largely indistinguishable from their white-collar neighbours.

J. Goldthorpe, D. Lockwood, F. Bechhofer and J. Platt – *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*

Despite the strong support for embourgeoisement, the evidence on which it was based was largely impressionistic. As such, embourgeoisement remained a hypothesis, a process that was assumed to be occurring but which had not been adequately tested.

In a famous study entitled *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, conducted in the 1960s, Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt (1968a, 1968b, 1969) presented the results of research designed to test the embourgeoisement hypothesis. They tried to find as favourable a setting as possible for the confirmation of the hypothesis. If embourgeoisement were not taking place in a context that offered every opportunity, then it would probably not be occurring in less favourable contexts.

Goldthorpe *et al.* chose Luton, then a prosperous area in south-east England with expanding industries. A sample of 229 manual workers was selected, plus a comparative group of 54 white-collar workers drawn from various grades of clerks. The study was conducted from 1963 to 1964 and examined workers from Vauxhall Motors, Skefko Ball Bearing Company and Laporte Chemicals. Nearly half the manual workers in the survey had come from outside the south-east area in search of stable, well-paid jobs. All were married and 57 per cent were home owners or buyers. They were highly paid relative to other manual workers and their wages compared favourably with those of many white-collar workers.

Although the Luton study was not primarily concerned with economic aspects of class, Goldthorpe, *et al.* argue, like many of the opponents of the embourgeoisement thesis, that similarity of earnings is not the same thing as similarity of market situation. White-collar workers retained many of their market advantages such as fringe benefits and promotion chances.

The Luton study tested the embourgeoisement hypothesis in four main areas:

1 attitudes to work
2 interaction patterns in the community
3 aspirations and social perspectives
4 political views.

If affluent workers were becoming middle class they should be largely indistinguishable from white-collar workers in these areas.

Instrumental orientation to work

The affluent workers defined their work in instrumental terms, as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Work was simply a means of earning money to raise living standards. Largely because of this instrumental orientation they derived little satisfaction from work. They had few close friends at work and participated little in the social clubs provided by their firms.

Most affluent workers accepted their position as manual wage earners as more or less permanent. They felt that there was little chance for promotion. They were concerned with making a 'good living' from their firms rather than a 'good career' within their company.

Like the traditional worker, affluent workers saw improvements in terms of wages and working conditions as resulting from collective action in trade unions rather than individual achievement. However, their attitude to unions differed from traditional working-class collectivism which was based largely on class solidarity, on strong union loyalty and the

belief that members of the working class ought to stick together. The affluent workers joined with their workmates as self-interested individuals to improve their wages and working conditions. Thus the solidaristic collectivism of the traditional worker had largely been replaced by the instrumental collectivism of the affluent worker.

By contrast, white-collar workers did not define work in purely instrumental terms. They expected and experienced a higher level of job satisfaction. They made friends at work, became involved in social clubs and actively sought promotion. However, because promotion prospects were increasingly slim for many lower-grade white-collar workers, they were adopting a strategy of instrumental collectivism and joining trades unions in order to improve their market situation.

In general, though, Goldthorpe et al. concluded that, in the area of work, there were significant differences between affluent manual workers and white-collar workers.

Friendship, lifestyle and norms

Supporters of the embourgeoisement thesis argued that once the affluent workers left the factory gates, they adopted a middle-class lifestyle.

Goldthorpe *et al.* found little support for this view. Affluent workers drew their friends and companions from predominantly working-class kin and neighbours and in this respect they followed traditional working-class norms. By comparison, white-collar workers mixed more with friends made at work and with people who were neither kin nor neighbours. The affluent workers showed no desire to mix with members of the middle class and there was no evidence that they either valued or sought middle-class status.

In one respect there was a convergence between the lifestyles of the affluent worker and the lower middle class. Both tended to lead a privatized and home-centred existence. The affluent workers' social relationships were centred on and largely restricted to the home. Their time was spent watching television, gardening, doing jobs around the house and socializing with their immediate family. There was no evidence of the communal sociability of the traditional working class. However, apart from the similarity of the privatized and family-centred life of affluent workers and the lower middle class, Goldthorpe *et al.* argued that the affluent workers had not adopted middle-class patterns of sociability.

Images of society

In terms of their general outlook on life, affluent workers differed in important respects from the traditional workers. Many had migrated to Luton in order to improve their living standards rather than simply accepting life in their towns of origin. In this respect, they had a purposive rather than a fatalistic attitude. As we noted previously, however, the means they adopted to realize their goals – instrumental collectivism – was not typical of the middle class as a whole. In addition, their goals were distinct from those of the middle class in that they focused simply on material benefits rather than a concern with advancement in the prestige hierarchy.

This emphasis on materialism was reflected in the affluent workers', images of society. Few saw society in terms of either the power model, based on the idea of 'us and them' which was characteristic of the traditional workers, or the prestige model which was typical of the middle class. The largest group (56 per cent) saw money as the basis of class divisions. In terms of this money, or pecuniary model, they saw a large central class made up of the majority of the working population.

Although differing from the traditional workers, the affluent workers' outlook on life and their image of society did not appear to be developing in a middle-class direction.

Political attitudes

Finally, Goldthorpe *et al.* found little support for the view that affluence leads manual workers to vote for the Conservative Party. In the 1959 election, 80 per cent of the affluent worker sample voted Labour, a higher proportion than for the manual working class as a whole. However, support for the Labour Party, like support for trade unions, was often of an instrumental kind. There was little indication of the strong loyalty to Labour that is assumed to be typical of the traditional worker.

The 'new working class'

Goldthorpe *et al.* tested the embourgeoisement hypothesis under conditions favourable to its confirmation, but found it was not confirmed. They concluded that it was therefore unlikely that large numbers of manual workers were becoming middle class. Even so, the Luton workers differed in significant respects from the traditional working class. In view of this, Goldthorpe *et al.* suggested that they may have formed the vanguard of an emerging new working class. While the new working class was not being assimilated into the middle class, there were two points of normative convergence between the classes: privatization and instrumental collectivism.

Finally, Goldthorpe *et al.* argued that the results of their study represented a rejection of economic determinism. The affluent worker had not simply been shaped by economic forces. Instead, the lifestyle

and outlook of the affluent worker were due in large part to the adaptation of traditional working-class norms to a new situation; they were not simply shaped by that situation.

Embourgeoisement and the privatized worker

David Lockwood (1966) believed that the privatized instrumentalist revealed by the affluent worker study would gradually replace the proletarian traditionalist. John Goldthorpe (1978) went further, claiming that working-class instrumentalism was a major factor in causing inflation in the 1970s. As groups of workers pushed for higher wages and tried to keep ahead of other manual workers in the earnings league, industrial costs went up, and with them prices. As prices rose, workers demanded even higher wages.

Stephen Hill – London dockers

A study of London dockers conducted in the 1970s by Stephen Hill (1976) provided some support for the view that the privatized instrumental worker was becoming more common. However, the study also raised doubts about the extent to which workers had ever conformed to the image of the proletarian traditionalist.

Stephen Hill suggests that the new working class might not be as new as Goldthorpe *et al.* believed. The 139 dock labourers in Hill's survey were remarkably similar to the Luton workers. Judging from past studies, the docks are one of the heartlands of proletarian traditionalism. Strong working-class solidarity, long-standing loyalties to unions and the Labour Party, close bonds between workmates, communal leisure activities, an emphasis on mutual aid, and a power model of society have all been seen as characteristic of dock workers. Either this picture has been exaggerated, or there have been important changes in dockland life.

There is probably some truth in both these viewpoints. The system of casual labour in the docks was abolished in 1967 and replaced by permanent employment. The constant threat of underemployment entailed in the casual labour system tended to unite dock workers. The change to permanent employment may have reduced the traditional solidarity of dockland life.

Like the Luton workers, the dockers in Hill's study defined their work primarily in instrumental terms. Their main priority was to increase their living standards. Only a minority made close friends at work, and only 23 per cent reported seeing something of their workmates outside work. Most dockers lived a privatized lifestyle and leisure activities were mainly home- and family-centred.

Like the Luton workers, the dockers regarded collective action in trade unions as essential for economic improvement. Over 80 per cent of dockers voted Labour, the most common reason for this being an identification with Labour as the party of the working class. Again these findings are very similar to those of the Luton study.

In terms of their views of society, the dockers belied their proletarian traditionalist image. Only 14 per cent saw the class structure in terms of a power model, whereas 47 per cent – the largest group subscribing to one particular view – saw society in terms of a money model. In this respect they are again similar to the Luton workers. Hill concludes that the working class is a relatively homogeneous group and the argument that there is a division between an old and new working class has been exaggerated.

Fiona Devine – *Affluent Workers Revisited*

Fiona Devine (1992) has directly tested Lockwood's claim that the privatized instrumentalist would become the typical member of the working class. While Hill had examined a traditional proletarian group and found evidence to support Lockwood, Devine went back to studying 'affluent workers'.

Between July 1986 and July 1987 she conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of 62 people from Luton. The sample consisted of 30 male manual workers employed on the shop floor at the Vauxhall car plant, their wives, and two further wives of Vauxhall workers whose husbands refused to participate. By returning to Luton, Devine was able to make direct comparisons between her own findings in the 1980s and those of Goldthorpe *et al.* in the 1960s.

Geographical mobility

Like the earlier study, Devine's found high levels of geographical mobility. Some 30 per cent of the sample had grown up away from Luton. However, unlike Goldthorpe *et al.*, she did not find that they had moved to Luton in search of higher living standards. With high levels of unemployment in the 1980s many had gone to Luton in search of greater job security. Some of those who had moved from London had done so in order to find more affordable housing.

Orientation to work

Devine found that her sample was interested in using work as a means of improving their living standards. However, they were 'faced with the threat of redundancy and unemployment which hung over their daily lives'. Thus, while they wanted to 'better

themselves', they were more concerned with attaining greater security. They expected no more than 'small, cumulative gains' in their living standards. Their consumer aspirations were more limited than those of their 1960s counterparts, though they were still rather greater than those supposed to be possessed by the 'traditional' working class.

The 1980s sample continued to belong to and support trades unions. Furthermore, they saw unions as a 'collective means of securing working class interests'. Money was not their only concern, and other issues led to feelings of solidarity with fellow workers. Devine says that 'their poor conditions of work, for example, were often shared with fellow workers, and this was recognised to be the case'. They were also concerned about the distribution of power at work, and were interested in securing humane and fair treatment for their colleagues and themselves in their working lives. Many of them were critical of unions, but these criticisms were directed at union tactics and not at the principle of having unions to defend working-class interests.

Overall, Devine follows Goldthorpe *et al.* in describing the workers' orientation to work as instrumental collectivism, but she found more evidence of collectivism in the 1980s than had appeared to be present in the 1960s. The concern with money and living standards did not prevent them from feeling a sense of solidarity with fellow workers.

Friendship, lifestyle and norms

Like Goldthorpe *et al.*, Devine did not find that Vauxhall manual workers were befriending members of the middle class. In some respects they had traditional working-class friendship patterns: men had friends from work and many of their wives retained close contacts with relatives. Men still enjoyed leisure outside the home with other men, particularly playing sports or going to the pub. Traditional gender roles were also in evidence; although many wives had paid employment they still had primary responsibility for domestic chores. This reduced their freedom to engage in leisure outside the home.

Nevertheless, Devine did find important differences between her sample and the supposed characteristics of traditional workers. She says that they 'were not engaged in extensive sociability in pubs, clubs or whatever', and they did not have a communal existence based on their neighbourhood. Their lifestyles 'did not totally revolve around the immediate family in the home' but at particular stages in the life cycle the home was very important. Families with young children had restricted opportunities for leisure in the community. Men were often working overtime to help provide materially for the family, and women had most of the responsibility for childcare. In short, their lifestyle was neither as communal as that of the proletarian traditionalist, nor as home-centred and privatized as Goldthorpe *et al.*'s affluent workers.

Images of society

The images of society held by Devine's sample were found to be very similar to those in the earlier study. They had a 'pecuniary model of the class structure.' Most saw themselves as belonging to a 'mass working/middle class' in between the very rich and the very poor. This did not, though, prevent them from sharing certain values with the traditional working class. Many felt resentment at those who had inherited money and a sense of injustice at the existence of extreme class inequalities. One said 'I disagree with a silver spoon. People should work for their money, not inherit it.' They wanted some redistribution of wealth away from the very rich and, with it, the creation of a somewhat more egalitarian society.

Political attitudes

Devine did find evidence of declining support for the Labour Party. As Table 2.14 shows, only 24 of the 62 in the sample had voted Labour in the 1979 or 1983 elections. On the surface this would seem to support the view that affluent workers were increasingly voting for individualistic and instrumental reasons. However, Devine did not find that disillusioned Labour Party supporters had abandoned their belief in the values traditionally associated with voting Labour. Instead, they had withdrawn their allegiance, perhaps only temporarily, because of the party's political failings. They were highly critical of the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978–9 when a Labour government had presided over widespread strikes. They were also unhappy about the breakdown in relations between the party and the unions, and critical of the party's performance in running the economy during the 1970s, and of internal divisions during the 1980s.

Table 2.14 Political allegiances of the interviewees in the Devine study

Political allegiance	Number of interviewees
Labour Party supporters	24
Disillusioned Labour Party supporters	24
Non-Labour Party supporters	14
Total	62

Source: F. Devine (1992) *Affluent Workers Revisited*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 199.

A number of the disillusioned voters felt fatalistic about politics. While they still felt that theoretically the Labour Party represented working-class interests, they doubted its ability to deliver economic prosperity or low unemployment. Nine of the disillusioned Labour voters said they intended to vote Conservative at the next election. Yet they hardly embraced the Conservative Party with wholehearted enthusiasm: for them, 'the only positive attraction of the Conservatives was their policy of selling council houses which was seen as "giving people the chance to better themselves".'

Conclusion

Devine's findings are rather different from those of Goldthorpe *et al.* some three decades earlier. She did not find that her sample had become the increasingly instrumental privatized workers predicted. She says:

> *The interviewees were not singularly instrumental in their motives for mobility or in their orientations to work. Nor did they lead exclusively privatised styles of life. Their aspirations and social perspectives were not entirely individualistic. Lastly, the interviewees were critical of the trades unions and the Labour Party, but not for the reasons identified by the Luton team [i.e. Goldthorpe* et al.*]*
>
> Devine, 1994, p. 9.

Devine rejects the idea of a 'new' working class and denies that the affluent workers have been persuaded to accept capitalist society uncritically. They have aspirations as consumers and their living standards have risen, but they would still like to see a more egalitarian society. They have lost faith in the ability of unions and the Labour Party to deliver this objective, but they have not fundamentally changed their values.

G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Vogler – continuities in the working class

There is considerable support for Devine's findings in a study of the British stratification system carried out by Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler (1988). Based on a national sample of 1,770 adults, the study found that 'sectionalism, instrumentalism, and privatism among the British working class are not characteristics somehow peculiar to the recent years of economic recession'.

Marshall *et al.* claim that historical studies show that there were artisans who put primary emphasis on their home life, and who had an instrumental attitude to work, well back into the nineteenth century. Furthermore, their data on contemporary workers suggest that they retain some commitment to their work and do not follow completely privatized lifestyles. For example, 73 per cent of their sample thought that their work was at least as important as any non-work activity, and over half numbered one or more workmates among their friends. They concluded that there was no evidence of a significant shift towards instrumentalism and privatism.

Divisions in the working class

Marxism and the homogeneous working class

Marx and Engels (1848) predicted that members of the working class would become increasingly homogeneous, or alike. The American Marxist Harry Braverman (1974) agrees with Marx. He claims that the pursuit of profit has led to more and more automation in factories. This in turn has reduced the need for skilled workers and has led to an increasingly undifferentiated and unskilled working class.

Ralf Dahrendorf – the disintegration of the working class

Official employment figures directly contradict this picture, and suggest that during the course of the twentieth century the number of skilled manual workers increased, while the number of unskilled manual workers fell. Such statistics seem to support the views of the German sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), rather than those of Marx and Braverman.

Dahrendorf argued that, contrary to Marx's prediction, the manual working class has become increasingly heterogeneous, or dissimilar. He saw this as resulting from changes in technology, arguing that 'increasingly complex machines require increasingly qualified designers, builders, maintenance and repair men and even minders'.

Dahrendorf claimed that the working class is now divided into three distinct levels: unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled manual workers. Differences in economic and prestige rewards are linked to this hierarchy of skill. Thus skilled craftspeople enjoy higher wages, more valuable fringe benefits, greater job security and higher prestige than semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

Dahrendorf argued that in place of a homogeneous proletariat 'we find a plurality of status and skill groups whose interests often diverge'. For example, craftspeople jealously guard their wage differentials against claims for pay increases by the less skilled.

In view of the differences in skill, economic and status rewards and interests within the ranks of manual workers, Dahrendorf claimed that 'it has become doubtful whether speaking of the working class still makes much sense'. He believed that during

the twentieth century there has been a 'decomposition of labour', a disintegration of the manual working class.

Roger Penn – historical divisions in the working class

Roger Penn (1983) agrees with Dahrendorf that the British working class is divided between different levels of skill; however, he does not believe that these divisions are anything new. Penn's views are based upon a study of workers in the cotton and engineering industries in Rochdale between 1856 and 1964.

He found that over the whole of that period the working class was sectionally organized in unions that represented specific groups of workers. The unions of skilled workers used social closure – they attempted to limit the recruitment and training of workers in skilled jobs – in order to maintain or improve the bargaining position of their members.

Penn found that unions were fairly successful over long periods of time in maintaining relatively high levels of pay for skilled and semi-skilled workers. Not surprisingly this tended to create competing groups within the working class and to weaken the extent to which members of different segments of the working class could act together.

However, if this has been the case for a century or more, it implies that Dahrendorf was wrong to see the working class as being more divided in the twentieth century than it was in the nineteenth.

Ivor Crewe – the 'new working class'

A second argument relating to divisions within the working class originates from studies of voting, and has been used to explain the failure of the Labour Party to retain working-class loyalty in the late 1970s and 1980s in UK elections. On the basis of his studies of British voting patterns, Ivor Crewe (1983) claims that the working class is divided, but not according to levels of skill but rather according to more specific factors.

Crewe believes that there is a new working class whose members possess one or more of the following characteristics:

1 they live in the south
2 they are union members
3 they work in private industry
4 they own their own homes.

They can be distinguished from the diminishing numbers of old working class who live in the north, belong to unions, work directly or indirectly for the government, and live in council houses. Crewe uses figures such as those in Table 2.15 to suggest that the new working class are deserting the Labour Party in large numbers, and abandoning the traditional proletarian socialist collectivism.

Crewe accepts that traditional proletarian collectivist views continue to exist, but believes that they are held by an ever-decreasing segment of the population. (For further details and evaluation of Crewe's work see Chapter 9.)

G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Vogler – skill and sectional divisions

Gordon Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler (1988) have used data from their study of the British stratification system to evaluate the claim that the working class is divided. In general terms, they support the view that the working class is divided into strata according to the level of skill involved in their work, but deny that the types of sectoral divisions identified by Crewe are significant.

Like Roger Penn, Marshall *et al.* believe that competition between different sections of the working class has created divisions lasting from the nineteenth century until the present day. In the nineteenth century, for example, the 'labour aristocracy' of skilled artisans caused splits in the working class. However, Marshall *et al.* do not claim that such divisions automatically prevent the working class acting as a group. They say:

Table 2.15 The two working classes: percentage of [illegible] party vote 1983

	New working class			Old working class		
	Owner-occupiers %	Works in private sector %	Lives in south %	Council tenants %	Works in public sector %	Lives in Scotland/north %
Conservative	47	36	42	19	29	32
Labour	25	37	26	57	46	42
Liberal/SDP	28	27	32	24	25	26

Source: I. Crewe, *The Guardian*, 13 June 1983

The 'working class' has always been stratified according to industry, locality, grade and occupation, and was so long before the emergence of Labour as a political force. Yet this prevented neither the emergence of a specifically working class party on the political stage nor the subsequent structuring of politics along class lines.

Marshall *et al.*, 1988, pp. 253–4

According to Marshall *et al.*, these class divisions are, nevertheless, much more important than sectoral cleavages. They measured the voting intentions of their sample and compared different classes, home owners and tenants, and public and private sector workers. Class was most closely connected with voting behaviour while there was no significant difference between the voting intentions of those in public or private sector employment. Council tenants were more likely to vote Labour whatever their social class, but an overwhelming majority of council tenants were working-class anyway.

Dennis Warwick and Gary Littlejohn – divisions in mining communities

Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) studied four communities in a mining area of West Yorkshire, surveying a total of 324 households in 1986 and 1987. They found evidence which appeared to contradict Marshall *et al.*'s views on the insignificance of sectoral cleavages. There was a 'strong element of anti-Thatcherism' among owner-occupiers and council tenants alike. For example, a majority in both groups opposed government support for private health and private education, and wanted higher taxes for the rich and reduced spending on defence. But there were significant differences in their politics. Some 65 per cent of tenants and 65 per cent of owner-occupiers claimed their parents had voted Labour. However, among males, 83 per cent of tenants now supported Labour compared to 57 per cent of those who owned or were buying their own homes.

Warwick and Littlejohn do not follow Crewe in claiming that housing tenure itself is the cause of increased divisions within the working class. Instead, they argue that housing tenure reflects a polarization between the relatively economically secure who have regular employment, and the rest. For the less well-off members of the working class, insecure employment, low income and poor health and residence in council housing tended to go together. Rising unemployment in the economic recessions, combined with the sale of council houses to the better-off, had led to a 'cleavage between citizens who still have clear means of participating in democracy, and those who are being pushed into what some call an "underclass".

From this point of view then, the major division in the working class is based on economic differences rather than level of skill. While there are sectoral cleavages, these derive from economic inequalities. Warwick and Littlejohn use the concept of an underclass very tentatively. This is not surprising since this concept is highly controversial. We will discuss it in detail later in the chapter (see pp. 89–96).

Class consciousness

Many Marxist sociologists argue that the contradictions of capitalism will eventually lead to a class-conscious proletariat. Class consciousness involves a full awareness by members of the working class of the reality of their exploitation, a recognition of common interests, the identification of an opposing group with whom their interests are in conflict, and a realization that only by collective class action can that opponent be overthrown. When practical steps are taken in pursuit of this goal, the working class becomes a 'class for itself'. Evidence from a variety of studies suggests that the working class is a long way from becoming a class for itself.

The limits to class consciousness

It has often been argued that the image of society held by proletarian traditionalists contains certain elements of class consciousness. The power model, with its emphasis on 'us and them', implies some recognition of common class interests, an indication of class solidarity, and at least a vague awareness of an opponent with whom the workers are in conflict.

The money model, on the other hand – which, judging from the studies of Goldthorpe *et al.* (1968a, 1968b, 1969), and Hill (1976), is the dominant image of society held by workers in Britain – suggests that the working class is becoming less rather than more class-conscious.

Further evidence from these studies supports this view. Nearly 70 per cent of the Luton workers believed that the inequalities portrayed in their images of society were a necessary and inevitable feature of industrial society. They were concerned with improving their position in the existing society rather than trying to create a new social order. Given the fact that they had improved their economic position, they had some commitment to the existing order. More recent evidence of the persistence of such attitudes can be found in a study conducted for the International Social Attitudes Report (Evans, 1993). This survey, based on a sample of nearly 2,500 people in Britain in 1987, found that 66 per cent of the working class and 62 per cent of skilled manual

workers agreed that large differences in pay are necessary.

Marxists have often argued that the road to revolution involves an alliance between the trade union movement and a radical political party. Workers must see the politics of the workplace and society as one and the same. The Luton workers typically saw the union as an organization limited to advancing their economic interests in the workplace. In fact 54 per cent of the Luton trade unionists expressed clearcut disapproval of the link between trade unions and the Labour Party.

In general the Luton workers saw little opposition between themselves and their employer, 67 per cent agreeing with the statement that at work 'teamwork means success and is to everyone's advantage'. They were largely indifferent to 'exploitation' at work, home and family being their central life interest.

This picture of harmony must not be overdrawn. As Goldthorpe and Lockwood *et al.* state (Goldthorpe and Lockwood, 1968a, 1968b, 1969), the employer–employee relationship is not free from 'basic oppositions of interest'. Workers are concerned with maximizing wages, employers with maximizing profits. The teamwork image of industrial relations held by the majority of workers did not prevent a bitter strike in 1966 at the Luton branch of Vauxhall Motors.

Despite the apparent acceptance of the social order by the Luton workers, their responses to a number of questions indicate some resentment about social inequality: 75 per cent agreed with the statement that there is 'one law for the rich and another for the poor' and 60 per cent agreed that big business has 'too much power'.

The dock labourers in Stephen Hill's study (1976) expressed similar attitudes to those of the Luton workers. They showed no great hostility to employers or management, the majority being 'fairly indifferent' towards them. Most were opposed to the link between trades unions and the Labour Party. Hill states:

> *The dock workers I interviewed were certainly hostile to the traditional alliance between unionism and Labour, refusing to accept the view that these formed the industrial and political wings of an integrated labour movement.*
>
> Hill, 1976, p. 140

However, despite the lack of radicalism in the workers' views of employers and of the link between trade unions and political parties, Hill did find evidence of left-wing opinions. Over 80 per cent of the dockers agreed with the statements that there is 'one law for the rich and another for the poor' and 'big business has too much power', and nearly 75 per cent agreed that 'the upper classes prevent fair shares'. Thus, like the Luton workers, the dockers appear to hold apparently conflicting radical and conservative views. We will discuss possible reasons for this shortly.

The potential for class consciousness

The studies by Hill, and Goldthorpe *et al.* may be interpreted as indicating a reduction of the potential for class consciousness. It appears that the proletarian traditionalist has been replaced by the privatized worker who is preoccupied with home and family and largely indifferent to wider political issues. John Westergaard, however, takes a rather different view (Westergaard, 1975):

1. First, he argues that the relatively self-contained working-class communities of the proletarian traditionalist encouraged a parochial outlook. Workers tended to have a narrow identification with their occupational group rather than with the working class as a whole. Westergaard argues that the break-up of traditional working-class communities may be necessary to provide 'a recognition of common interests with workers in other situations, outside the immediate locality'.
2. Second, since privatized workers define their work in instrumental terms, their sole attachment to work is the cash-nexus or money connection. As such, their attachment to work is single-stranded. It is not strengthened by pride in work, friendships at work or loyalty to the employer. A single-stranded connection is brittle: it can easily snap. If the privatized workers' demands for high wages and rising living standards are not met (for example in times of economic depression) the cash-nexus may well snap and there will be nothing else to hold them to their jobs and make them accept the situation. In such circumstances, privatized workers may become increasingly radical and recognize that their interests lie in collective class action.
3. Third, Westergaard argues that the seeds of class consciousness are already present even in the apparently conservative Luton workers. He sees evidence of this from their views on the power of big business and the workings of the legal system, views echoed by the London dockers. Westergaard claims that this demonstrates that the working class have at least a basic grasp of their class interests and of the conflict in interests between themselves and the ruling class.

The persistence of class consciousness

Westergaard's view that the seeds of class consciousness remain within the working class has been supported by Fiona Devine (1992, 1994). Her study of affluent workers in Luton during the 1980s (see pp. 81–3 for further details) found considerable evidence of the persistence of class consciousness. The workers wanted to improve their living standards and those of their families, but that did not prevent them from

perceiving society as unjust or from desiring change. They shared with other workers a similar living standard and a desire to improve it and gain increased security.

According to Devine, these shared experiences and desires were a basis for class solidarity. The affluent workers' sense of injustice focused on the very rich. Many resented the fact that, unlike ordinary members of society, the very rich did not have to work for a living. This led the affluent workers to hope for:

> *a more equitable distribution of resources in society as it stood, and, by implication, a more equal, free and democratic society in which people would be more justly and fairly rewarded than at present.*
>
> Devine, 1994, p. 8.

Trade unions and the Labour Party were still regarded as 'collective means of securing both individual and collective ends'. However, support for them had declined because some of Devine's sample thought they had failed in delivering improvements for the working class.

While there was a strong awareness of a class division between the very rich and ordinary workers, there was less consciousness of a split between the working class and the middle class. Most of the sample thought that class divisions had declined in significance and saw themselves as belonging to a large class of 'ordinary' working people. Nevertheless, those who were employed at the Vauxhall plant still experienced a strong sense of class division at work:

> *Manual workers at the car plant were aware of a sense of superiority and separateness held by the foremen and white-collar workers which placed them in an inferior position. The status aspects of the organisation of the workplace and people's attitudes of social superiority were a considerable source of grievance.*
>
> Devine, 1994

The affluent workers of the 1980s were more pessimistic about the prospects for changing society but they had not lost the desire for change nor their sense of class inequality. To Devine, they retained a considerable amount of class consciousness.

Inconsistencies in class consciousness

There is a tendency in many studies of class consciousness to assume that workers hold a clear, consistent and coherent image of society, and to mould data into neat, tidy categories.

For example, the Luton workers of the 1960s are usually discussed in terms of their money model of society, yet only 54 per cent held that model, while 26 per cent had images which fitted neither power, prestige nor money models, and 7 per cent had 'no communicable image' (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1969). Hill's study revealed that only 47 per cent of dockers held a money model and he was impressed with 'the range of different images which people within one group can embrace' (Hill, 1976). More emphasis might well be given to the variety and diversity of workers' images of society.

In addition, many workers do not hold clear and consistent views on society. Hill found that the dockers' fairly radical opinions on the power of big business, the workings of the law and the maintenance of inequality by the upper classes were inconsistent with their relatively conservative views on the role of trade unions and the nature of employment. He notes that they 'appeared to have their views fairly well compartmentalized'. As a result, the dockers seemed to have no problem with holding apparently contradictory views.

Similar findings were produced from a study of the ideology of 951 unskilled manual workers in Peterborough, conducted in 1970–1 by R. M. Blackburn and Michael Mann (1975). They found that both right- and left-wing views co-existed in the workers' ideology. Blackburn and Mann concluded that the workers did not possess consistent images of society.

In fact, Blackburn and Mann suggest that there is every reason to expect that this should be the case. The workers' experience of subordination and exploitation in the workplace tends to produce a power model of society and radical attitudes that demand a change in the status quo. However, the workers are also exposed to the ideology of the dominant class broadcast by the mass media and transmitted by the educational system and various other institutions. This ideology is conservative: it supports the existing social arrangements and states that the relationship between capital and labour is right, natural and inevitable. As a result, workers 'remain confused by the clash between conservatism and proletarianism, but touched by both'.

Beliefs and actions

On the basis of questionnaire research with a national sample of British adults, David Marshall, Howard Newby, David Rose and Carolyn Vogler (1988) reached somewhat similar conclusions to Blackburn and Mann. They claimed that class consciousness often did not produce a coherent view of the world. Respondents quite frequently gave inconsistent answers. For example:

1 Only 30 per cent of those who rejected leaving the economy to market forces to produce economic revival, also supported using government intervention for this purpose.

2 Some 19 per cent of those who wanted increased taxation to expand the welfare state, were themselves unwilling to pay more tax for this purpose.
3 A mere 25 per cent of those who supported the use of an incomes policy to reduce wage differentials, were themselves willing to accept pay restraint to achieve it.

The last two examples suggest that beliefs and actions will not always coincide, so class consciousness does not necessarily lead to class-based actions.

The continuing relevance of class

Nevertheless, Marshall *et al.* emphasize the continuing relevance and importance of class for the British population. Rose and Marshall summarize some of their findings in the following way:

> *over 90 per cent of our respondents could place themselves in one of the conventionally defined class categories; 73 per cent viewed class as an inevitable feature of British society; and 52 per cent recognised the existence of class conflicts over important social issues in Britain.*
>
> Rose and Marshall, 1988 p. 23

Furthermore, half of the sample believed there was a dominant class that possessed economic and political power, and a lower class that had no economic and political power.

Marshall *et al.* found a surprisingly widespread sense of injustice about the distribution of income and wealth in British society. Table 2.16 shows the percentage of the population who believed the distribution of income in Britain was unfair, and the reasons they gave for this belief. The class categories

Table 2.16 Attitudes to distributional justice by Goldthorpe class

A 'Is distribution of wealth and income fair?'	Class								
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	All	Total
Yes	31	34	28	44	24	25	22	29	(368)
No	69	66	72	56	76	75	78	71	(914)
B 'Why not?'	**I**	**II**	**III**	**IV**	**V**	**VI**	**VII**		
Distribution favours those at the top									
Gap between haves and have-nots is too wide	57	59	63	64	55	63	63		
Pay differentials are too wide	21	19	19	19	26	21	19		
Too much poverty, wages too low, too many reduced to welfare	13	17	20	16	13	17	18		
Some people acquire wealth too easily (unearned income, etc.)	31	16	13	13	20	10	9		
The higher paid are not taxed severely enough	9	15	11	9	12	20	16		
Welfare benefits are too low	6	5	6	2	8	9	6		
The lower paid or working class are taxed too severely	2	3	3	5	3	0	2		
Inequalities of opportunity (in education, for jobs, etc.)	2	2	2	0	0	1	2		
Unequal regional distribution (of jobs, income, etc.)	4	3	3	0	2	1	2		
Distribution favours those at the bottom									
There are too many scroungers around	6	5	12	9	15	8	10		
Pay differentials are too narrow	5	4	1	3	4	4	4		
The higher paid are taxed too severely	4	2	3	8	3	3	3		
Other reasons									
Inequality of wealth and income inevitable	1	4	4	2	7	2	2		
Key groups of workers can hold the country to ransom	1	1	0	0	0	0	0		

Note: Percentages in the 'Why not?' columns are based on respondents. Valid cases = [illegible]
Source: G. Marshall, H. Newby, D. Rose and C. Vogler (1988) *Social Class in Modern Britain*, Hutchinson, London, [illegible]

used are based upon John Goldthorpe's classifications (see pp. 114–16 for further details). They show that a majority of all social classes believed that the existing distribution of income and wealth was unfair, and, although lower classes were more likely to believe this, the percentage difference between them and higher classes was not particularly great.

Marshall *et al.* do not claim that there is widespread support for radical changes in the social structure, but they do believe that there is support for reforms that would lead to a more equitable society. They found little optimism, though, that such reforms were likely, or even possible.

Rose and Marshall claim:

> *At the risk of oversimplifying, it would appear that while most people disapprove of social injustice, they do not think that they can do anything to change the system. Nor do they think that our elected leaders will do anything either.*
>
> Rose and Marshall, 1988, p. 24.

Marshall *et al.* do not believe that class consciousness is automatically produced by the existence of class divisions. Rose and Marshall say:

> *class consciousness is not simply a matter of individual beliefs, attitudes and values, which can be explained by reference to social locations and can be tapped by questions in a survey. To be sure, individuals have beliefs and experiences which reflect their social location. But for such beliefs to have effectiveness, for them to produce class consciousness rather than class awareness, requires that they be given explanation and direction. That is, they require organising.*
>
> Rose and Marshall, 1988, p. 25

Despite the potential for class consciousness, the British population has not been mobilized in support of a programme that would tackle the sources of their sense of injustice. In this respect, Rose and Marshall point their fingers at the Labour Party for having failed to tap the reservoir of potential support for change.

Many Marxists believe that class consciousness will eventually be generated by the contradictions of capitalism. Many non-Marxists would regard this as a possibility, but an unlikely one: they would tend to agree with Ken Roberts *et al.* (1997) that 'the working class remains an unstable and continuing challenge but not a revolutionary threat'.

The lower strata

Although some sociologists see the working class as the lowest stratum in capitalist societies, others argue that there is a group beneath it. The most disadvantaged sections of capitalist society have been described in many ways. Kirk Mann says:

> *Terms such as 'the underclass', 'marginalized groups/stratum', 'excluded groups', 'reserve army of labour', 'housing classes', 'the pauper class', 'the residuum', 'relative stagnant population' and, more obviously, the poor, have all been used to describe a section of society which is seen to exist within and yet at the base of the working class.*
>
> Mann, 1992, p. 2.

Of these terms, underclass is the one that has enjoyed the widest currency in recent years. Those sociologists who have identified a group of people at the bottom of the stratification system have seen them as having various distinguishing characteristics. These have included being poor, unemployed or dependent on benefits. In some cases they have been defined as a group whose behaviour contravenes the norms and values of society. Thus some sociologists have emphasized the economic distinctiveness of the lower strata while others have concentrated on their supposed cultural or behavioural differences from the rest of the population.

In the latter case, the lower strata have been seen as constituting a social problem that poses a threat to society. They can also, however, be seen as a sociological problem for theories of stratification. Some theories of stratification have been based upon occupations, leaving the unemployed as a group who are difficult to categorize. In this chapter we will focus on the implications of the existence of lower strata for theories of stratification. Later chapters will discuss the relationship between the underclass and poverty (see pp. 323–33), and the underclass and ethnicity (see pp. 283–5).

Marx's view of the lower strata

The lumpenproletariat

In recent years, sociologists, journalists and politicians have all paid considerable attention to the 'problem' of the lower strata, but this interest is nothing new. In the nineteenth century Karl Marx was among those who expressed views on these groups. He used a number of different terms to

describe those at the bottom of the stratification system of capitalist societies.

He used the word 'lumpenproletariat' to describe the lowest group of all. The picture he paints of them is less than flattering. They are variously seen as:

> *This scum of the depraved elements of all classes ... decayed roués, vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazzaroni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, brothel keepers, tinkers, beggars, the dangerous class, the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society.*
>
> Marx and Engels, 1950, p. 267

It is unclear from Marx's writing whether he regarded this group as a class or not.

Lydia Morris points out that his usage of the term is inconsistent and it may 'variously refer to an historical remnant from an earlier society, a group of individual social degenerates, or a category located outside of the economic system of industrial capitalism'.

Although, at times, Marx did refer to these people as a class, at other times he dismissed the idea that they can form a class because he saw them as having little potential for developing class consciousness or taking collective action.

The reserve army of labour

The term lumpenproletariat has not been widely used by contemporary sociologists, but the idea of a reserve army of labour has been more influential. It exists because of the way the capitalist economy works. According to Marx, there are inevitably periods of boom, during which more workers are taken on, and periods of slump when many workers lose their jobs. The reserve army of labour consists of those who are employed as substitute workers and who are only needed during the booms.

To Marx, they perform important functions in capitalist societies. In *Capital* he says: 'the industrial reserve army, during periods of stagnation and average prosperity, weighs down the active army of workers; during the periods of over-production and feverish activity, it puts a curb on their pretensions'. It helps to drive down wage costs for capitalist employers by providing a flexible group of workers who are desperate for jobs and are willing to undercut the wages demanded by other workers. They will take the places of those who are sacked or made redundant. When the profitability of a company falls, threatening its survival, the employer may be forced to recruit cheaper workers from the reserve army of labour.

The existence of a reserve army of labour makes it more difficult for the employed workforce to be radical and to resist, for example, the introduction of new machinery or more intensive work practices.

The relative surplus population

Rather confusingly, Marx also used a third term, the relative surplus population, to refer to those at the bottom of the stratification system. This includes members of the reserve army of labour, but it also embraces groups which at other times he defined as members of the lumpenproletariat.

The relative surplus population is divided into four:

1. The floating surplus population consists of workers who are employed until they reach adulthood but are then dismissed, because adults are paid higher wages. (In contemporary Britain those young people on government training programmes who are used as a cheap labour force and are not offered a job on completion of their training could be seen as part of this group.)
2. The latent surplus population is made up of agricultural workers who are no longer needed and who are on the point of seeking work in urban areas.
3. The stagnant surplus population is part of the active labour force 'but with extremely irregular employment'. It is part of 'an inexhaustible reservoir of disposable labour-power', and it has living standards that are lower than average for the working class. Workers who have been made redundant and whose jobs have been lost as a result of new technology are likely to be in this group. Marx claimed that members of the stagnant surplus population tend to have large families – indeed the lower the workers' wages, the more children they have.
4. At the bottom of the relative surplus population 'dwells the sphere of pauperism'. Pauperism is itself divided into four groups: first, 'criminals, vagabonds, prostitutes, in short the actual lumpenproletariat'; second, paupers who are capable of working but who simply cannot find jobs; third, 'orphans and pauper children' who are likely to be recruited to the reserve army of labour in prosperous years; and fourth, 'the demoralized, the ragged and those unable to work'. This includes the elderly, victims of industrial accidents, 'the mutilated, the sickly, the widows, etc.'

Evaluation and criticisms of Marx

Some aspects of Marx's work on the lower strata have been quite influential. For example, the concept of a reserve army of labour has been applied by some feminist sociologists to the position of women in modern capitalist societies (see pp. 170–1). However, his views have also been heavily criticized.

Kirk Mann argues that Marx uses a wide range of criteria to distinguish the lower strata from the rest of the working class. He says 'Marx links economic,

social and psychological issues to the pathology of individuals and social groups'. He does not stick to using the purely economic definition of class which characterizes his work on other classes. Furthermore, many of Marx's views are so critical of the lower strata they seem to represent little more than personal prejudice. Mann argues:

> *Even allowing for the late Victorian period, the terms 'stagnant', 'floating', 'latent' and 'lowest sediment' suggest an unsympathetic stance. When he asserts that certain sections of the reserve army of labour breed more rapidly, and 'succumb to their incapacity for adaptation', while others are part of some criminal class, Marx reproduces the prejudices of the Victorian middle classes.*
>
> Mann, 1992, p. 139

One reason perhaps why Marx was so critical of the relative surplus population was that he did not see them as having the potential to develop class consciousness. Mann questions this view, suggesting, for example, that urban riots and the existence of Claimants' Unions (organizations for those drawing benefits) show that the 'surplus population' is no more conservative than the working class.

Although Marx's writings on these particular groups seem rather dated, they do reflect problems that more contemporary sociologists have faced in trying to distinguish a group below the working class. Some have emphasized the cultural distinctiveness of such a group, while others have looked for a definition based upon economic differences. Both these elements are contained in Marx's work. Unlike Marx, most contemporary sociologists have used the term underclass to describe the groups at the bottom of the stratification system.

Charles Murray – the underclass in America and Britain

The underclass in America

Although not the first writer in recent times to use the term underclass, the American sociologist Charles Murray has probably done more than anyone else to popularize its usage. In *Losing Ground*, published in 1984, Murray argues that the USA has a growing underclass which poses a serious threat to American society. Murray argues that government policies are encouraging increasing numbers of Americans to become dependent on benefits. During the 1960s, welfare reforms led to an increase in the numbers of never-married black single parents, and to many black youths losing interest in getting a job. Increases in the level of benefits and changes in the rules governing them discouraged self-sufficiency. Murray argues that the growing size of the underclass is a threat to the social and economic well-being of the country because its members are responsible for a rising crime rate and the benefits paid to them are costly to taxpayers.

The underclass in Britain

Charles Murray visited Britain in 1989 and wrote an article for the *Sunday Times*. In it he argues that Britain too has a developing underclass, although unlike America it is neither firmly established nor is it mainly composed of ethnic minorities. Murray defines the underclass in terms of behaviour. He says 'the "underclass" does not refer to a degree of poverty, but to a type of poverty'. These types of poor people were known to him in his youth and:

> *They were defined by their behaviour. Their homes were littered and unkempt. The men in the family were unable to hold a job for more than a few weeks at a time. Drunkenness was common. The children grew up ill-schooled and ill-behaved and contributed a disproportionate share to the local juvenile delinquents.*
>
> Murray, 1989, p. 26

Describing himself as 'a visitor from a plague area come to see if the disease is spreading', he finds signs that Britain too is being infected. These signs consist of figures showing rising rates of illegitimacy, a rising crime rate and an alleged unwillingness among many of Britain's youth to take jobs. In certain neighbourhoods, traditional values such as beliefs in honesty, family life and hard work have been seriously undermined. As a consequence, increasing numbers of children are being raised in a situation where they are likely to take on the underclass values of their parents.

Evaluation of Murray

Murray's views on the underclass add little to theories of stratification. By insisting on using a cultural definition of the underclass he neglects any economic divisions that contribute to the creation of any such class: in many ways his work is better seen as a theory of poverty than as a theory of stratification. We will therefore evaluate his work in more detail in Chapter 5 on poverty and social exclusion (see pp. 323–8), where we will show that in America much of the evidence suggests that the benefits system does not have the effects he claims. The evidence he uses to make out the case for an underclass in Britain is flimsy and sometimes contradictory.

Murray blames the underclass for its predicament, explaining the situation in terms of its own aberrant behaviour. To quote Kirk Mann, he sees the British underclass as 'criminally violent bastards who refuse

to work'. Most sociologists view the so-called underclass rather more sympathetically. Unlike behavioural and cultural accounts of the underclass, structural accounts tend to see the lowest strata in society as the victims of inequality. They therefore tend to make more explicit connections between the underclass and the stratification system of society as a whole.

Ralf Dahrendorf – the underclass and the erosion of citizenship

The culture of the underclass

Dahrendorf's characterization of the underclass has some similarities with that of Murray. Dahrendorf also sees the underclass as a type of social illness, calling it 'a cancer which eats away at the texture of societies'. He believes that an underclass exists both in America and in Britain, and he sees it as having undesirable cultural characteristics. Its culture:

> *includes a lifestyle of laid-back sloppiness, association in changing groups of gangs, congregation around discos or the like, hostility to middle class society, peculiar habits of dress, of hairstyle, often drugs or at least alcohol – a style in other words which has little in common with the values of the work society around.*
>
> Dahrendorf, 1992 p. 13

Although this is very similar in tone to Murray's argument, Dahrendorf parts company from him in explaining how the underclass came about.

Changes in work

Dahrendorf claims that the development of an underclass has been caused by changes in work. Technological innovation has made it possible to produce far more with far fewer workers. He says 'we can produce mountains of goods while reducing the number of producers', and claims that current levels of output could be achieved with 20 per cent fewer workers.

Some have argued that jobs in services will replace jobs in manufacturing, but Dahrendorf does not believe this will eliminate the problem. Wage costs are high in much of Europe and this makes many services too expensive for consumers to afford. The consequence is that they generate little extra employment and they do not prevent the growth of an underclass of the unemployed. In the USA, on the other hand, wages are more flexible and it is more common to employ workers at very low wage rates to provide services. The problem is that these wages are so low that those receiving them cannot escape membership of the underclass.

Even those who have relatively well-paid employment are increasingly employed part-time or on short-term contracts. Many worry about their job security and 'such doubts are one of the reasons why they tend to close doors behind them'. The successful majority who have adequate sources of income make sure that their position is protected. Trade unions, companies and educational establishments all tend to exclude the underclass from the institutions that could bring them success. Unions protect their members' wages at the expense of creating unemployment for others; companies employ the well-qualified; and the education system does not give members of the underclass adequate opportunities to gain the qualifications they need. Dahrendorf says 'Those who are in, by and large, stay in, but those who are not, stay outside.'

The underclass and citizenship

Dahrendorf argues that citizenship involves the existence of entitlements which everybody shares. Members of the underclass are not full citizens because they do not have an economic stake in society, and society provides them with little security. They include many immigrants and young people who have not had a chance to become full members of society, while some of the elderly and 'those who have suffered mishaps of one kind or another' have lost their place in society.

Those who lack a stake in society have no reason to conform to society's norms. They develop their own norms. These are sometimes antagonistic to mainstream society and are passed down from generation to generation. The underclass then comes to pose a threat to other members of society. Although it is not a revolutionary force, the frustrations of the underclass do lead to rioting and violent crime. It therefore threatens the well-being of those who are full citizens.

Dahrendorf sees no easy solution to the problem of the underclass. He doubts that full employment can ever be achieved again but he does believe that there is something to be gained by a more equitable distribution of work. Job sharing and similar measures will allow more members of society to become full citizens. He also calls for 'a hundred if not a thousand local initiatives' by charismatic individuals who can help the underclass escape from its position by promoting community development.

Evaluation

Dahrendorf provides a rather more convincing explanation of the development of the underclass than Murray, but he too resorts to rather stereotypical descriptions of its behaviour. He includes a wide variety of groups in his underclass: the elderly, those

who have suffered 'misfortune', the unemployed, the low-paid, the young and immigrants who have not gained a foothold in society. It is unclear exactly what these groups have in common. While they are all held to lack citizenship rights, Dahrendorf fails to provide a precise definition of those rights.

Furthermore, in his original article (1987) he is unclear about whether the underclass should be seen as a class or not. He says that 'one may wonder whether the word class is as yet appropriate'. The lack of precision in his argument makes it difficult to determine whether the use of the term underclass is appropriate or not. In a later article he says that 'it is precisely not a class', arguing that the underclass is simply a group of people who are not needed by society and who represent a challenge to dominant values.

If Dahrendorf's view that the underclass is not a class is accepted, then, as in the case of Murray, his work seems to add little to theories of stratification.

Anthony Giddens – the underclass and the dual labour market

The middle class, working class and underclass

Giddens (1973) is more confident than Dahrendorf that an underclass exists. He also integrates his theory of the underclass more fully into a theory of stratification, and he defines the underclass more precisely. As mentioned earlier in the chapter (see pp. 69–70), Giddens sees the middle class as those who possess educational or technical qualifications. This gives them an advantage in the labour market over the working class who have only their manual labour power to sell. Members of the underclass also have to rely upon selling their manual labour power, but, compared to the working class, they are at a disadvantage when trying to do so. As a result, they tend to secure employment in the least desirable and most insecure jobs.

The dual labour market

Giddens argues that contemporary capitalist societies have a dual labour market. Jobs in the primary labour market have 'high and stable or progressive levels of economic returns, security of employment and some chance of career mobility'. Jobs in the secondary labour market have 'a low rate of economic return, poor job security, and low chances of career advancement'. Employers need to plan ahead, and to be able to do so they need a reliable and committed group of workers in key positions. High and secure rewards are necessary to ensure the loyalty of these workers. This inevitably raises labour costs. In order to reduce overall costs, workers who are in less important positions and who are more easily replaced are paid much lower wages and are offered less job security. It is these secondary sector workers who come to make up the underclass.

The composition of the underclass

Giddens argues that women and ethnic minorities are particularly likely to be found in the underclass. Employers recruit women to underclass jobs partly because of 'social prejudice', but also because they are likely to interrupt their careers as a result of marriage and childbirth. Ethnic minorities are also the victims of discrimination and prejudice. In the USA, blacks and Hispanics form the main members of the underclass. Indeed, at one point Giddens defines the underclass in terms of its ethnicity. He says:

> *Where ethnic differences serve as a 'disqualifying' market capacity, such that those in the category are heavily concentrated in the lowest paid occupations, or are chronically unemployed or semi-employed, we may speak of the existence of an underclass.*
>
> Giddens, 1973, p. 112.

Giddens sees the American underclass as the most developed, but also sees West Indians and Asians in Britain, and Algerians in France as constituting underclasses. He notes that migrant workers often become members of the underclass. Many black Americans in the underclass migrated to the cities from rural areas. He claims that 'in many contemporary European societies the lack of an indigenous ethnic minority leads to a 'transient underclass' (which turns out not to be so transient after all) being imported from the outside'.

The underclass and class conflict

Giddens argues that there is a basic difference of interest between the underclass and the working class. The underclass are radicalized by their experience of deprivation. On the other hand, members of the working class, with relatively secure jobs and comfortable living standards, have more conservative attitudes. They are likely to be hostile to calls for radical social change emanating from the underclass.

Evaluation of Giddens

Although Giddens's argument is more coherent than Dahrendorf's, it has also come in for strong criticism.

Kirk Mann has raised serious questions about the concept at the heart of Giddens's theory, that of the dual labour market. He argues that there is no clear dividing line between a primary and a secondary labour market. For example, some jobs are well paid but with little job security; others are poorly paid but

relatively secure. It is unclear from the dual labour market theory whether such jobs should be seen as primary or secondary jobs.

Mann also questions the claim that dual labour markets, if they exist, result from the tactics used by employers to recruit suitable workers and keep their labour costs down. He gives an example saying:

> *The miners in the mid-1970s were able to gain large wage increases and considerable improvements in their pension and other occupational welfare packages, but these were not offered by the National Coal Board (NCB). On the contrary, they were fought for and squeezed from the NCB at a time when the NCB was trying to shed labour.*
>
> Mann, 1992, p. 122.

The labour market is influenced by the actions of workers as well as the wishes of employers.

Perhaps Mann's strongest criticism concerns the theory's attempt to explain why certain groups of workers end up in the dual labour market. According to Mann there is no real explanation of why particular groups are the victims of discrimination. The dual labour market theory fails to provide an account of the 'racist and sexist ideologies' that lead to the exclusion of women and ethnic minorities from many of the better jobs. Furthermore, Giddens and other dual labour market theorists ignore the role of workers and union organizations in excluding women and ethnic minorities.

The relationships between ethnicity and the underclass and between gender and poverty have both been the subject of considerable sociological controversy. We analyse these controversies in later chapters (see pp. 283–5 on ethnicity and the underclass and pp. 311–13 on gender and poverty). Some sociologists have also questioned Giddens's view that the underemployed or semi-employed should be included as part of the underclass. These views will be dealt with later in this section.

Duncan Gallie – the heterogeneity of the underclass

Labour market inequalities

Duncan Gallie (1988, 1994) has questioned both conservative views of the underclass (such as those of Murray) and radical ones (such as those of Giddens). He denies that the so-called underclass has a distinctive culture. Like Mann, he rejects the idea of a dual labour market, suggesting that there is little empirical evidence that it exists. However, he follows Giddens in arguing that there are substantial and increasing numbers of people in a very weak position in the labour market. He says:

> *A significant sector of the employed population receives pay close to or below the official poverty line and there are marked inequalities of pay by race and gender. There has been a substantial increase in the proportion of part-time rather than full-time work. Perhaps most important of all, there has been a substantial increase in the 1980s of the most severe type of labour market disadvantage, the experience of unemployment.*
>
> Gallie, 1988

All of this does seem to point to a growing underclass, but what Gallie questions is whether the groups involved can be seen as forming a class in either cultural or other terms.

The culture of the underclass

Gallie uses data from the Economic and Social Research Council's Social Change and Economic Life Initiative to evaluate different claims about the underclass (Gallie, 1994). This research used interviews carried out in 1986 to examine the labour market in six areas: Swindon, Aberdeen, Northampton, Coventry, Rochdale and Kircaldy. It found no evidence to support Murray's claim that the unemployed lacked the attitudes and commitment necessary to hold down employment. Both the employed and the unemployed had had an average of six jobs during their work careers.

Looking at the average length of the longest job ever held by different groups again revealed little variation. For the employed the average was 76 months, for the unemployed 74 months, and for the long-term unemployed 73 months. The unemployed, it seemed, had, in the past at least, been able to keep jobs for a substantial period, suggesting they were by no means unemployable. Furthermore, the unemployed were more committed to working than the employed: 77 per cent of the unemployed said they would want to work even if they had enough money to retire in comfort, compared to 66 per cent of the employed and self-employed.

Nor was there any evidence that the long-term unemployed became apathetic and resigned to being without work. Those who had been unemployed for long periods felt a greater sense of deprivation at being without work than those who had been without work for only a short time.

Divisions in the underclass

Gallie's research did find that the unemployed were materially deprived, and tended to be considerably worse off than those in employment. Nevertheless, he did not accept the view of some radical writers that this had led to them forming a distinctive group below the working class. To Gallie, there was little chance of, or evidence for, either the unemployed, or

more generally the most disadvantaged in society, forming a united, class-conscious group.

Ethnic minorities are disadvantaged in the labour market, but there is considerable variation in individual situations. Some members of ethnic minorities are very successful.

The same applies to women, and in any case women are less likely to be unemployed than men. Although many women leave the labour market when they have young children, most women appear to regard this as 'basically legitimate'. They have little sense of grievance that would lead them to make common cause with other people who have no paid employment. Women are more likely to be employed in part-time work than men, 'but the evidence suggests that women involved in such work have high levels of satisfaction with their employment situation'.

Gallie sees the unemployed as the group most likely to develop some sort of distinctive underclass culture. Even so, many of the unemployed quickly find work and 'there are huge flows into and out of the stock of the unemployed each month'. This does not disguise the existence of a large and growing group of long-term unemployed. Yet even this group is unlikely to develop any sort of underclass consciousness.

The long-term unemployed are quite heterogeneous. Men and women in this group are often in different personal circumstances, and individuals suffering long-term unemployment may be at very different stages in the life cycle. For example, an unemployed female school leaver may feel she has little in common with an unemployed man of 55.

The underclass and the working class

Gallie also found little evidence of a political split between the working class and the underclass. Members of the working class who had kept their jobs did not blame unemployment on the laziness or personal inadequacy of those without jobs. There is no evidence of a 'conservative backlash'.

In his later research (1994), Gallie found that the unemployed tended to have traditional working-class political views. Very few of them had engaged in non-conventional political protests, such as going on demonstrations and marches or undertaking direct action. On the other hand, they were more likely to express support for government spending on the welfare state than members of the working class. They were also more likely to support the Labour Party: 54 per cent of employed unskilled manual workers said they would vote Labour, compared to 67 per cent of the short-term unemployed, 78 per cent of the medium-term, and 78 per cent of the long-term unemployed who had previously had unskilled manual work. Gallie concludes that 'unemployment neither leads to a propensity to direct action nor to political passivity. Rather the resentments of the unemployed are channelled into increased support for the traditional party of the working class – the Labour Party.'

Despite all his arguments, Gallie does not dismiss the idea of an underclass out of hand. He does say:

> *The one case where the concept of an underclass would appear to have some relevance is that of the long-term unemployed. Their deprivations are distinctive from those generated directly by the employment relationship and they have the type of stability over time that is assumed by underclass theory.*
>
> Gallie, 1988

Even this tentative use of the term is qualified. Gallie points out that the long-term unemployed have close connections with the working class: most were formerly manual workers or came from working-class backgrounds.

Evaluation

While Gallie successfully shows that the supposed underclass, particularly the unemployed, may not form a particularly cohesive group, some writers question whether this invalidates the idea of the underclass altogether. Ken Roberts (1997) argues that the underclass includes a wide variety of groups with different lifestyles, but it may still be a useful concept.

Similarly 'hustlers, the homeless, and young single mothers do not share a common way of life. Welfare dependants who need to know their rights develop quite different skill repertoires to drug dealers.' Nevertheless, they all have certain characteristics in common. They are all more deprived than the working class, their deprivation may persist over considerable periods of time, and they may have lifestyles and social networks which are distinct from those in employment.

While Roberts is not sure that an underclass exists yet, in contrast to Gallie he does believe it is quite likely that one is being formed and that it will become well established in the future. (See pp. 330–3 for ethnographic studies relating to the underclass debate.)

W.G. Runciman – the underclass as claimants

The underclass and the class structure

Runciman has devised a seven-class model of the British class structure based upon differences in control, ownership and marketability (Runciman,

1990). We will examine this model in detail later in this chapter (see pp. 117–18). Runciman identifies an underclass at the bottom of his class structure. He explicitly rejects Giddens's view that it should be defined as 'a category of workers systematically disadvantaged in the labour market'. Runciman mentions Gallie's work in suggesting that a different definition of the underclass is needed.

Runciman defines the underclass as: 'those members of British society whose roles place them more or less permanently at the economic level where benefits are paid by the state to those unable to participate in the labour market at all'.

Many are from ethnic minority backgrounds, and many are women, particularly single mothers, but it is their reliance upon state benefits that places them in the underclass, not their gender or ethnicity. (A similar view which also sees the underclass as consisting of claimants has been put forward by Frank Field. It is discussed on pp. 328–30.)

Criticisms of Runciman

Runciman appears to offer a straightforward and plausible definition of the underclass. However, Hartley Dean and Peter Taylor-Gooby (1992) have attacked his views. They point out that Runciman stresses the importance of 'career' in class analysis: that is, the future prospects and past history of individuals in the class system must be examined before allocating them to a class. Yet Runciman fails to take this into account when considering the underclass.

For example, figures suggest that on average lone parents stay as lone parents for a mere 35 months. Similarly, most of the long-term unemployed have had jobs in the past. They are unstable members of the working class rather than members of a stable underclass. To Dean and Taylor-Gooby the so-called underclass is simply too unstable and impermanent to be seen as a class.

They also attack Runciman for basing his definition of the underclass on quite different criteria to those used in his definitions of other classes. Members of the underclass are not defined in terms of their relationship to the market but in 'purely institutional terms'. They exist in a relationship with the state, not the economic system. In terms of Runciman's definition, their existence depends upon the existence of state benefits. Nevertheless, in comparing his class scheme with classes in Britain in 1910, Runciman equates the underclass with a 'loafer class' described by an Edwardian commentator called D'Aeth. Dean and Taylor-Gooby say:

> *The implication would seem to do Runciman's argument no good at all, because without an institutional relationship to the post-war welfare state, the roles assigned to the underclass are defined in terms of behaviour – the intermittence of their labour and their drinking habits.*
>
> Dean and Taylor-Gooby, 1992, pp. 40–1

Conclusion

Dean and Taylor-Gooby's latter criticism is not particularly strong. However Runciman defines the Edwardian underclass, it is clear that the contemporary underclass is defined in terms of its dependence on benefits and not in terms of behaviour. This dependence can be seen as a consequence of the lack of control, power and particularly marketability possessed by the underclass.

However, Dean and Taylor-Gooby do have a point when they suggest that there is a constant danger of the term underclass being misused. They say that 'underclass is a symbolic term with no single meaning, but a great many applications. It represents, not a useful concept, but a potent symbol.' It has become a symbol of 'socially constituted definitions of failure'. However it is used by sociologists, in society in general it is used to lay the blame on the disadvantaged for the social problems of which they are the victims.

Dean suggests that the term underclass should be abandoned. Not only is it misused, but in his view no underclass as such exists. He says that it 'does not usefully define a real or tangible phenomenon'. He believes that the debate about the underclass has touched on important issues though. He therefore concludes:

> *Recent structural and cultural changes have intersected, not to produce an 'underclass', but to shift the boundaries between core workers, peripheral workers and non-workers; between the individual and the family; and between the citizen and the welfare state. Such changes have also exacerbated regional inequalities and inner-city decay and, some would argue, may have contributed to rising levels of crime. We should not go in search of the underclass, but strive for a better understanding of structural and cultural changes and their complex interrelationships and effects.*
>
> Dean, 1991

Social mobility in capitalist society

Having looked at the different classes, we will now consider the amount of movement from one class to another within capitalist society.

Ascription and achievement

This section examines the nature of social mobility in capitalist society. It is generally agreed that the rate of social mobility – the amount of movement from one stratum to another – is significantly higher in industrial societies than in pre-industrial societies. Industrial societies are therefore sometimes described as open. In other words, they have a relatively low degree of closure.

In particular, it is argued that status in pre-industrial societies is largely ascribed, whereas in industrial societies it is increasingly achieved. As a result, ascribed characteristics such as class of origin, sex, race and kinship relationships have less and less influence on an individual's social status. Status is seen to be increasingly achieved on the basis of merit: talent, ability, ambition and hard work are steadily replacing ascribed characteristics as the criteria for determining a person's position in the class system. Indeed, a number of sociologists have suggested that this mechanism of social selection is built into the values of industrial society. Thus Talcott Parsons (1964) argues that achievement is one of the major values of American society. Individuals are judged and accorded prestige in terms of their occupational status, which is seen to be largely achieved by their own effort and ability.

The importance of social mobility

Sociologists are interested in social mobility for a number of reasons:

1 The rate of social mobility may have an important effect on class formation. For example, Anthony Giddens (1973) suggests that if the rate of social mobility is low, class solidarity and cohesion will be high. Most individuals will remain in their class of origin and this will 'provide for the reproduction of common life experiences over the generations'. As a result, distinctive class subcultures and strong class identifications will tend to develop.

2 A study of social mobility can provide an indication of the life chances of members of society. For example, it can show the degree to which a person's class of origin influences his or her chances of obtaining a high status occupation.

3 It is important to know how people respond to the experience of social mobility. For example, do the downwardly mobile resent their misfortune and form a pool of dissatisfaction which might threaten the stability of society?

Before considering these issues, it is necessary to examine the nature and extent of social mobility in capitalist society.

Types of social mobility

Sociologists have identified two main types of social mobility:

1 The first, intragenerational mobility, refers to social mobility within a single generation. It is measured by comparing the occupational status of an individual at two or more points in time. Thus, if a person begins their working life as an unskilled manual worker and ten years later is employed as an accountant, they are socially mobile in terms of intragenerational mobility.

2 The second type, intergenerational mobility, refers to social mobility between generations. It is measured by comparing the occupational status of sons with that of their fathers (and only rarely the occupational status of fathers or mothers with that of their daughters). Thus, if the son of an unskilled manual worker becomes an accountant, he is socially mobile in terms of intergenerational mobility.

This section will focus mainly on intergenerational mobility, the type of social mobility most frequently studied by sociologists.

Problems of measurement

There are many problems associated with the study of social mobility:

1 Occupation is used as an indicator of social class and researchers use different criteria for ranking occupations. Many researchers classify occupations in terms of the prestige associated with them; others place more emphasis on the economic rewards attached to them. As a result, occupational classifications differ and the results of various studies are not strictly comparable.

2 A further problem arises from the fact that it is not possible to identify many members of the bourgeoisie on the basis of their occupations: a person's occupation does not necessarily say anything about the extent of their investments in private industry.

3 Furthermore, many studies of social mobility have not included data on women's mobility, and patterns of female mobility tend to be rather different from men's. This is largely because women tend to be concentrated in particular parts of the occupational structure.

4 The findings of studies can be expressed in different ways; for example in simple percentages or in odds ratios, and odds ratios themselves can be calculated in different ways (see below, p. 103). There is controversy about which types of data best represent the structure of opportunity in society. Similar controversies surround the use of absolute and relative mobility rates (see below for details).

In view of these and other problems, the findings of social mobility studies must be regarded with caution.

David Glass – social mobility before 1949

The first major study of intergenerational mobility in England and Wales was conducted by David Glass and his associates in 1949 (Glass (ed.), 1954). The main findings of this study are summarized in Table 2.17.

The percentages in the horizontal rows (in the top right-hand corner of each cell) compare the status of sons with the status of their fathers. Thus, taking all the sons whose fathers were in the status category 1, 38.8 per cent of these sons are themselves in category 1, 14.6 per cent are in category 2 and so on through to category 7 in which only 1.5 per cent of sons born into category 1 are located. The figures in bold print, going diagonally across the table, indicate the extent to which sons share the same status as their fathers. For example, 27.4 per cent of all sons whose fathers were in category 7 are themselves in that same category in 1949.

The percentages in the vertical columns (in the bottom left-hand corner of each cell) refer to the parental status of the men found in each category in 1949. For example, of all the men in status category 1 in 1949, 48.5 per cent have fathers who were in that category, 15.5 per cent have fathers who were in category 2 and so on. The bold figures show the percentage of men in each category who have the same status as their fathers. For example, 25 per cent of all the men in category 7 are the sons of fathers from that category.

Overall, the table indicates a fairly high level of intergenerational mobility. Nearly two-thirds of the men interviewed in the 1949 study were in a different status category from that of their fathers. Roughly one-third moved upward and one-third downward. However, for the most part, the change in status is not very great. Most mobility is short range: sons generally moving to a category either adjacent or close to that of their fathers. There is little long-range mobility either from top to bottom or vice versa.

In the higher-status categories there is a considerable degree of self-recruitment – a process by which members of a stratum are recruited from the sons of

Table 2.17 Social mobility in England and Wales before 1949

Fathers' status category	Sons' status category in 1949: 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
1	**38.8**	14.6	20.2	6.2	14.0	4.7	1.5	100.0
	48.5	11.9	7.9	1.7	1.3	1.0	0.5	(129)
2	10.7	**26.7**	22.7	12.0	20.6	5.3	2.0	100.0
	15.5	**25.2**	10.3	3.9	2.2	1.4	0.7	(150)
3	3.5	10.1	**18.8**	19.1	35.7	6.7	6.1	100.0
	11.7	22.0	**19.7**	14.4	8.6	3.9	5.0	(345)
4	2.1	3.9	11.2	**21.2**	43.0	12.4	6.2	100.0
	10.7	12.6	17.6	**24.0**	15.6	10.8	7.5	(518)
5	0.9	2.4	7.5	12.3	**47.3**	17.1	12.5	100.0
	13.6	22.6	34.5	40.3	**50.0**	43.5	44.6	(1,510)
6	0.0	1.3	4.1	8.8	39.1	**31.2**	15.5	100.0
	0.0	3.8	5.8	8.7	12.5	**24.1**	16.7	(458)
7	0.0	0.8	3.6	8.3	36.4	23.5	**27.4**	100.0
	0.0	1.9	4.2	7.0	9.8	15.3	**25.0**	(387)
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
	(103)	(159)	(330)	(459)	(1,429)	(593)	(424)	(3,497)

Status categories
No. Description
1 Professional and high administrative
2 Managerial and executive
3 Inspectional, supervisory and other non-manual (higher grade)
4 Inspectional, supervisory and other non-manual (lower grade)
5 Skilled manual and routine grades of non-manual
6 Semi-skilled manual
7 Unskilled manual

Source: D. V. Glass (ed.) (1954) *Social Mobility in Britain*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, p. 183

those who already belong to that stratum. The way the figures are presented tends to disguise the degree of self-recruitment. From the table it appears that the highest level of self-recruitment is in category 5: in 1949, 50 per cent of the members of category 5 are the sons of fathers who were in that same category. However, since category 5 is by far the largest group, a relatively high degree of self-recruitment is to be expected. By comparison, category 1 is a very small group made up of just over 3.5 per cent of the sample. Yet in 1949, 48.5 per cent of the members of category 1 are the sons of fathers who were in that same category. This is over 13 times greater than would be expected by chance. If parental occupation had no influence on a person's status, only some 3.5 per cent of the sons in category 1 would have fathers in that category.

Family background appears to have an important influence on life chances. The higher the occupational status of the father, the more likely the son is to obtain a high-status position. Most men are likely to stay at roughly the same level as their fathers and this is particularly true at the top end of the scale. Glass's study therefore reveals a significant degree of inequality of opportunity.

Criticisms of Glass

Any conclusions drawn from this study must, however, be tentative. Not only is the data now very dated, but the research methodology has been the subject of lengthy criticism. In particular, it has been argued that Glass's findings do not reflect changes in the occupational structure before 1949. For example, a comparison of the actual numbers of sons born into the first four status categories (shown in the right-hand vertical column of the table) with the number found in those categories in 1949 (shown in the horizontal row across the bottom) suggests a contraction of white-collar occupations. However, as Payne, Ford and Robertson note (1977) there was a 16 per cent expansion of these occupations during the 30 years preceding 1949. This throws doubt on the validity of Glass's sample. It suggests that his findings may seriously underestimate the rate of social mobility and in particular the degree of long-range upward mobility. (For a detailed criticism of Glass's methodology see Payne, Ford and Robertson, 1977.)

The Oxford Mobility Study

After 1949, the next major study of social mobility in England and Wales was conducted in 1972 and published in 1980, with an updated version published in 1987 (Goldthorpe, 1980, Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1987). Known as the Oxford Mobility Study, it was undertaken by a group of sociologists at Nuffield College, Oxford. The results cannot be compared in detail with those of the 1949 study since different criteria were used as a basis for constructing the various strata. Where Glass used a classification based on occupational prestige, the Oxford study categorized occupations largely in terms of their market rewards. These categories are based on John Goldthorpe's original seven-class scheme, which was introduced earlier in the chapter (see p. 70) and will be discussed later (see pp. 114–15).

Table 2.18 summarizes the main findings on intergenerational mobility from the Oxford survey.

Absolute mobility

The 1972 study revealed higher rates of long-range mobility than the 1949 study. For example, Table 2.18 shows that 7.1 per cent of sons of class 7 fathers were in class 1 in 1972. In addition, the table suggests that there are high rates of absolute mobility (the total amount of social mobility); in no social class did more than 50 per cent of the sample originate from the same social class. The Oxford Mobility Study found high rates of social mobility, and more was upward than downward. It also found that the chances of those from working-class backgrounds reaching a higher social class had improved during the course of the century.

Relative mobility

On the surface, these findings seem to support the claim that British society is becoming more open. However, the study found that relative mobility chances varied greatly between the classes, and the relative chances had changed little during the course of the century.

The concept of relative mobility refers not to the total amount of social mobility, but to the comparative chances of those from various class backgrounds of reaching particular positions in the social structure. Thus 45.7 per cent of sons with class 1 fathers – but just 7.1 per cent of those with class 7 fathers – ended up in class 1.

By comparing the relative mobility chances of different generations it is possible to determine whether the class structure has become more open. In Figure 2.2 those born in 1908–17 are compared with those born in 1938–47. The seven-class scheme usually used by Goldthorpe is simplified by amalgamating classes to reduce the number of classes to three. (The service class consists of classes 1 and 2, the intermediate class of classes 3, 4 and 5, and the working class of classes 6 and 7.)

Figure 2.2 shows that the chances of members of all social classes attaining service-class jobs increased over the period studied. However, this was largely the

result of changes in the occupational structure: service-class jobs as a proportion of male employment rose from 13 to 25 per cent, while intermediate jobs declined from 33 to 30 per cent, and working-class jobs from 54 to 45 per cent. The relative chances of the sons of those from different classes taking advantage of the increasing room at the top of the stratification system changed little.

This has been neatly summarized by Kellner and Wilby (1980) as the 1:2:4 rule of relative hope. This rule suggests that over the period covered, as a rough estimate, whatever the chances of a working-class boy reaching the service class, they were twice as great for intermediate-class boys, and four times as great for service-class boys. In other words, there has been no significant increase in the openness of the British stratification system.

Trends since the Oxford Mobility Study

In a follow-up study Goldthorpe and Payne (1986) brought figures on social mobility more up-to-date by examining data from the 1983 *British Election Survey*. They wanted to discover whether economic recession in the period 1972–83 had produced different patterns of mobility to those found in the Oxford study, carried out during a period of economic expansion.

Overall, they found few differences between the results of the two studies. Service-class jobs continued to expand as a proportion of all male jobs; absolute mobility continued to increase, but relative mobility stayed about the same.

However, they did find that unemployment had affected the position of all classes, and the working class in particular. There were still opportunities for upward mobility from the working class, but members of the working class were more likely to become unemployed than members of the higher classes.

Table 2.18 The Oxford study of mobility

Father's class	Sons' class in 1972: 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total
1	**45.7**	19.1	11.6	6.8	4.9	5.4	6.5	100.0
	25.3	12.4	9.6	6.7	3.2	2.0	2.4	(680)
2	29.4	**23.3**	12.1	6.0	9.7	10.8	8.6	100.0
	13.1	**12.2**	8.0	4.8	5.2	3.1	2.5	(547)
3	18.6	15.9	**13.0**	7.4	13.0	15.7	16.4	100.0
	10.4	10.4	**10.8**	7.4	8.7	5.7	6.0	(687)
4	14.0	14.4	9.1	**21.1**	9.9	15.1	16.3	100.0
	10.1	12.2	9.8	**27.2**	8.6	7.1	7.7	(886)
5	14.4	13.7	10.2	7.7	**15.9**	21.4	16.8	100.0
	12.5	14.0	13.2	12.1	**16.6**	12.2	9.6	(1,072)
6	7.8	8.8	8.4	6.4	12.4	**30.6**	25.6	100.0
	16.4	21.7	26.1	24.0	31.0	**41.8**	35.2	(2,577)
7	7.1	8.5	8.8	5.7	12.9	24.8	**32.2**	100.0
	12.1	17.1	22.6	17.8	26.7	28.0	**35.6**	(2,126)
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
	(1,230)	(1,050)	(827)	(687)	(1,026)	(1,883)	(1,872)	(8,575)

Classes
No. Description
1 Higher professionals, higher grade administrators, managers in large industrial concerns and large proprietors
2 Lower professionals, higher grade technicians, managers in small business and industrial concerns and supervisors of non-manual employees
3 Routine non-manual employees, mainly clerical and sales personnel
4 Small proprietors and self-employed artisans
5 Lower grade technicians and supervisors of manual workers
6 Skilled manual workers
7 Semi- and unskilled manual workers

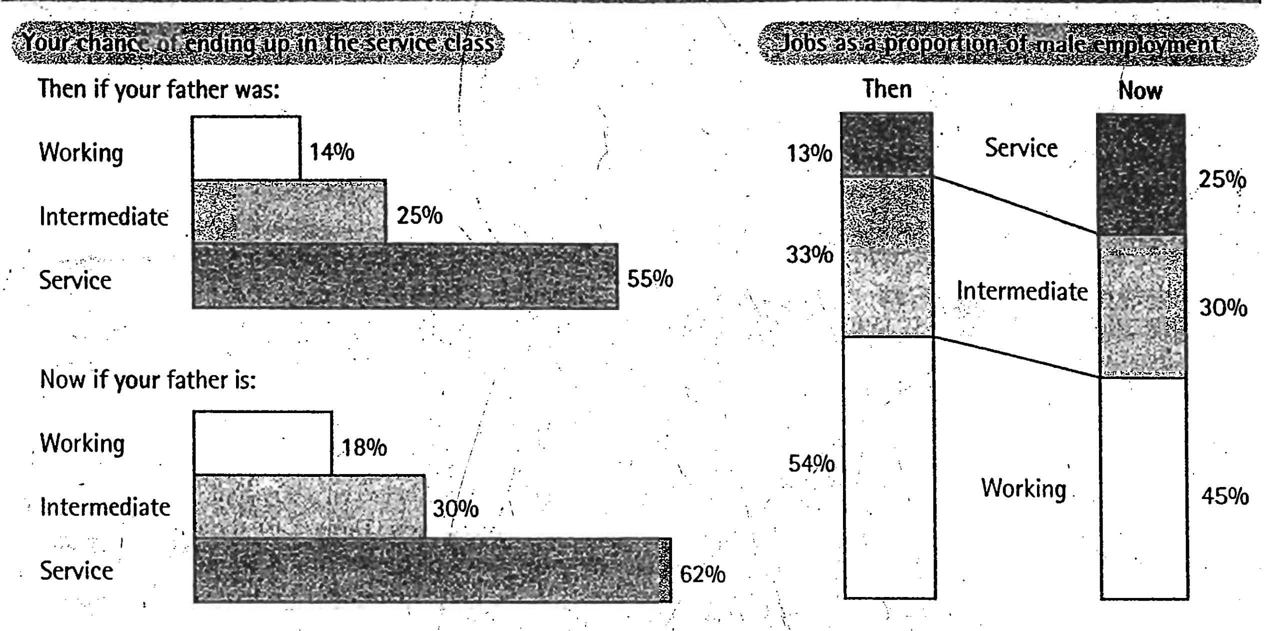
Source: J. Goldthorpe (1980) *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 44–49.

Elite self-recruitment

The Oxford Mobility Study and Goldthorpe's later work suggest that there is not a high degree of social closure at the top of the British stratification system, but Goldthorpe can be criticized for ignoring the existence of small elites or, in Marxist terms, a ruling class. Goldthorpe's class 1 is a relatively large grouping, containing 10–15 per cent of the male working population. Studies that concentrate on small elite groups within class 1 reveal a much higher degree of closure.

The process by which members of wealthy and powerful groups are drawn from the children of those who already belong to such groups is known as elite self-recruitment. A number of studies have indicated the degree of elite self-recruitment in Britain. For example, a survey by Stanworth and

Figure 2.2 Relative mobility chances of different generations



Source: P. Kellner and P. Wilby, *The Sunday Times*, [illegible]

Giddens (1974), designed to investigate the social origins of company chairmen, revealed a high degree of elite self-recruitment. Out of 460 company chairmen in 1971, only 1 per cent had manual working-class origins, 10 per cent had middle-class backgrounds, and 66 per cent came from the upper class, which was defined as 'industrialists, landowners, (and) others who possess substantial property and wealth'. (There were insufficient data to classify the remaining 23 per cent.) (See Chapter 9 for further studies of elite self-recruitment.)

Thus the Oxford study, while showing a relatively high rate of mobility into class 1, does not indicate the degree of elite self-recruitment. Though class 1 as a whole appears fairly open, elite groups within that class are relatively closed.

Gender and mobility

J. H. Goldthorpe and C. Payne's views on gender and social mobility

A second major problem with the Oxford Mobility Study is the fact that it ignores women. Goldthorpe believes that the unit of stratification in industrial societies is the family. The class position of the family is given according to the occupation of the main breadwinner, which is usually a man. Other sociologists hotly dispute this view. (For details of the debate on gender and stratification see pp. 109–11.)

With specific reference to gender and social mobility, Goldthorpe and Payne have examined data from the 1983 *British Election Survey* to determine what difference it makes to the results of studies of social mobility if three different approaches are adopted to including women in the data (Goldthorpe and Payne, 1986):

1 In the first approach, women are included but their class is determined by their husband's occupation. Goldthorpe and Payne found this made little difference to either the absolute or relative rates of intergenerational social mobility found in studies using an all-male sample.
2 In the second approach, the occupation of the partner in full-time employment with the highest class position is used to determine the class of both partners. Single women are included on the basis of their own job. This approach also made little difference to relative mobility rates although Goldthorpe and Payne conceded that it does at least allow information on women who are unattached, or who are household heads, to be included.
3 In the third approach, individuals are allocated to classes on the basis of their own jobs. This did show that absolute mobility rates for women and men were very different. This was largely due to the fact that women are distributed differently from men in the occupational structure (see later sections). However, once again this method of including women in the data made little difference to the intergenerational, relative mobility rates of different classes. In other words, the mobility chances of women compared to other women from different classes were as unequal as the social mobility chances of men compared to men from other classes.

Table 2.19 Gross mobility rates by gender in the Scottish Mobility Study in 1974–5

Gender	Mobility (%)			Of upwardly mobile moved to	
	Upward	Static	Downward	Classes I or II	Classes I or IV
Men	42.5	27.4	30.4	44	29
Women	32.2	19.9	48.8	6	67

Source: P. Abbott and G. Payne, 'Women's social mobility: recent research', in G. Payne and P. Abbott (eds) (1990) *The Social Mobility of Women*, Falmer Press, Basingstoke, p. 18.

Goldthorpe and Payne therefore concluded that the non-inclusion of women in earlier studies of social mobility was not important since it made little difference to the overall results, at least in terms of determining the openness of the stratification system.

Alternative views

Michelle Stanworth (1984) is highly critical of Goldthorpe for insisting on categorizing women in social mobility studies according to the class of their husband. She prefers an approach based upon individuals being allocated to a class according to their own job.

Some research seems to support Stanworth's view in that it shows important differences in the social mobility of men and women. Anthony Heath has used data from the 1972 and 1975 *General Household Surveys* to examine the intergenerational mobility of women (Heath, 1981). He compared women's social class with their father's class (though not their mother's), and reached the following conclusions:

1 Women of class 1 and 2 origins were much more likely to be downwardly mobile than men of the same class origin. This was largely because of the preponderance of females in class 3 (routine non-manual jobs).
2 Women from higher social classes were less likely to follow in their father's footsteps than men from the same classes.
3 On the other hand, women of class 5, 6 or 7 origins were far more likely to be upwardly mobile to class 3 than their male counterparts, although Heath points out that whether this movement can be considered 'upward mobility' is a moot point. As indicated earlier, some sociologists do not believe that routine non-manual workers have any significant advantages over most manual workers (see pp. 66–7, 68–9).

Heath argues that the disadvantages suffered by the daughters of fathers in the higher classes are greater than the advantages experienced by the daughters of fathers from lower classes. If Heath is to be believed, then the British stratification system is less open than studies based on males would suggest.

Rather similar conclusions have been reached by Pamela Abbott and Geoff Payne (1990). They used data from a study of social mobility in Scotland to compare men and women. This study was carried out by Geoff Payne in 1974–5 and used a sample of 5,000 men born between 1909 and 1955 and 3,500 wives of these men. Table 2.19 shows the gross mobility rates of the men and women in the sample.

The data demonstrate that many more women than men were downwardly mobile, fewer women were upwardly mobile, and very few of the women who did manage to be upwardly mobile ended up in the top two classes. Once again they suggest that the omission of women from data can give a misleading impression of absolute mobility rates.

The Essex study of mobility

As part of their study of social class in Britain, Gordon Marshall, David Rose, Howard Newby and Carolyn Vogler (1988) collected data on social mobility (details of the study can be found on p. 83). Since the study collected data on male and female mobility rates it allows some evaluation of the controversies about female mobility. It also provides more recent data than the Oxford Mobility Study as it was carried out in 1984. The study collected information on both intergenerational and intragenerational mobility.

Table 2.20 shows Marshall *et al.*'s results on intergenerational mobility. These are based on a comparison between the respondent and the person who was their 'chief childhood supporter' at the same age as the respondent. It uses Goldthorpe's original seven-class model (see pp. 114–15 for details of this model).

Like earlier studies the Essex study found there had been an expansion of white-collar jobs and consequently there were high absolute rates of upward mobility. The results for men are fairly similar to those in the Oxford study, but the results for women show different patterns of social mobility. They confirm the findings of Heath, and Abbott and Payne that women's mobility patterns are affected a great deal by the concentration of

Table 2.20 Class distribution of respondents by sex and class of chief childhood supporter at same age as respondent – Goldthorpe class categories

		Class of respondent								
		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	Total	
Males (n = 632)										
	I	27.7	31.9	12.8	6.4	4.3	10.6	6.4	100.0	(47)
	II	20.8	39.6	3.8	11.3	1.9	13.2	9.4	100.0	(53)
Class of chief	III	25.0	21.9	0.0	6.3	9.4	31.3	6.3	100.0	(32)
childhood	IV	14.4	15.6	5.6	28.9	10.0	11.1	14.4	100.0	(90)
supporter	V	14.4	18.9	4.5	7.2	13.5	13.5	27.9	100.0	(111)
	VI	8.0	12.4	9.5	6.6	14.6	23.4	25.5	100.0	(139)
	VII	11.9	8.1	4.4	11.9	10.0	18.8	35.0	100.0	(160)
Females (n = 425)										
	I	13.8	27.6	48.3	3.4	0.0	0.0	6.9	100.0	(29)
	II	14.3	42.9	32.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	10.7	100.0	(28)
Class of chief	III	4.2	37.5	37.5	4.2	0.0	4.2	12.5	100.0	(24)
childhood	IV	9.1	25.5	30.9	9.1	3.6	1.8	20.0	100.0	(55)
supporter	V	0.0	27.5	42.5	6.3	1.3	6.3	16.3	100.0	(80)
	VI	3.6	15.3	44.1	2.7	5.4	8.1	20.7	100.0	(111)
	VII	2.0	8.2	30.6	8.2	6.1	5.1	39.8	100.0	(98)

Source: G. Marshall, D. Rose, H. Newby and C. Vogler (1988) *Social Class in Modern Britain*, Unwin Hyman, London, p. 77.

women in routine non-manual jobs. Large numbers of women were both upwardly and downwardly mobile into class III.

Odds ratios

The Essex study also expressed the data collected in terms of odds ratio tables measuring relative mobility chances. These compare the chances of people competing for places in classes. For example, they measure the chances of service-class children ending up in the working class compared to the chances of working-class children ending up in the service class. As Marshall *et al.* put it, they 'are an indication of the relative chances of getting to alternative class destinations. They are the outcomes, as it were, of a competition between individuals of different class origins to achieve or avoid one rather than another destination in the class structure.' Tables 2.21, 2.22 and 2.23 use this type of data:

1 Table 2.21 compares the class of a person's chief childhood supporter with that person's first job.

2 Table 2.22 compares the class of a person's chief childhood supporter with that person's current job.

3 Table 2.23 compares a person's class in their first job with their current class.

The tables are based upon a simplified three-class version of Goldthorpe's scheme (i.e. service class, intermediate class and working class). For example, Table 2.21 shows that when men from service- and working-class backgrounds compete for service-class rather than working-class destinations, those from service-class backgrounds are 7.76 times as successful. For women the equivalent figure is 14.07.

According to the authors, the tables support Goldthorpe's contention that relative intergenerational mobility rates for women are influenced by class in a similar way and to a similar extent to those of men. Marshall *et al.* say 'Overall patterns among women and men are not dissimilar although there are differences in the relative odds pertaining to particular transitions.' According to this view, class background influences women's mobility as much as it does men's, although the absolute patterns of mobility are different for the sexes because women are more highly concentrated in certain parts of the stratification system than men.

Table 2.21 Relative mobility chances in terms of odds ratios, by Goldthorpe class and sex. Transition from class of origin to class position on entry into employment

Pairs of origin classes in competition	Pairs of destination classes competed for: Men S vs I	Men S vs W	Men I vs W	Women S vs I	Women S vs W	Women I vs W
S vs I	2.02	4.13	2.05	2.43	4.63	1.90
S vs W	1.95	7.76	4.09	3.84	14.07	3.63
I vs W	0.96	1.88	2.00	1.58	3.04	1.91

Table 2.22 Relative mobility chances in terms of odds ratios, by Goldthorpe class and sex. Transition from class of origin to present class position

Pairs of origin classes in competition	Pairs of destination classes competed for: Men S vs I	Men S vs W	Men I vs W	Women S vs I	Women S vs W	Women I vs W
S vs I	2.75	3.09	1.12	1.67	3.75	2.23
S vs W	4.00	7.35	1.82	3.77	12.95	3.43
I vs W	1.47	2.37	1.62	2.23	3.45	1.54

Table 2.23 Relative mobility chances in terms of odds ratios, by Goldthorpe class and sex. Transition from class on entry into employment to present class position

Pairs of origin classes in competition	Pairs of destination classes competed for: Men S vs I	Men S vs W	Men I vs W	Women S vs I	Women S vs W	Women I vs W
S vs I	2.39	8.71	3.64	4.31	10.96	2.51
S vs W	6.08	41.68	7.01	6.04	50.00	8.15
I vs W	2.54	4.79	1.93	1.40	4.56	3.25

Service (Classes I and II)
Intermediate (Classes III, IV and V)
Working (Classes VI and VII)

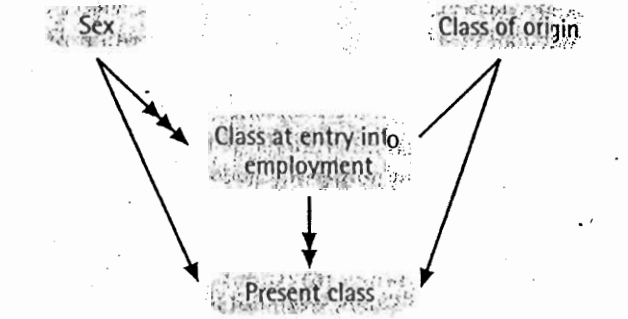
Source: G. Marshall, D. Rose, H. Newby, and C. Vogler (1988) *Social Class in Modern Britain*, Unwin Hyman, London, p. 105.

Sex, class, intergenerational and intragenerational mobility

The Essex study also examined the relationship between sex, class of origin and class at entry into employment and present class. Figure 2.3 illustrates its findings. The number of heads in the arrow indicates the strength of the effects involved. Thus the data suggests that sex has a particularly strong influence on first jobs but a rather weaker effect upon current class. Class of origin has a strong effect upon present class, and the first job also affects the class people end up in.

The data include some interesting findings on intragenerational mobility. Some 84 per cent of men who started their careers in service-class jobs and

Figure 2.3 The relationship between class of origin, class destination and sex



Source: G. Marshall, D. Rose, H. Newby, and C. Vogler (1988) *Social Class in Modern Britain*, Unwin Hyman, London, p. 105.

who came from service-class backgrounds were still in the service class when they were interviewed. However only 64 per cent of men who started work in the service class but came from working-class backgrounds were still in the service class. (For women the corresponding figures were 77 per cent and 43 per cent.) Thus even when individuals start their careers in the upper part of the stratification system, class background still exercises a strong influence on their chances in life, dragging down a considerable proportion of those from working-class backgrounds.

As we shall see, though, some aspects of the Essex study have been attacked by Peter Saunders.

Is Britain a meritocracy?

Peter Saunders – *Unequal but Fair?*

All the evidence examined so far would suggest that Britain is not a meritocracy: success and failure in the labour market do not depend on ability and effort. Peter Saunders, however, whose New Right theory of stratification was outlined earlier (see pp. 30–2), challenges the view that studies of social mobility demonstrate a high degree of inequality of opportunity. In *Unequal but Fair?* (1996), Saunders seeks 'to demonstrate, against the popular myth and the received sociological wisdom, that occupational selection and recruitment is much more meritocratic than most of us realise or care to believe'. Although he does not claim that Britain is a perfect meritocracy, he does believe that merit is the most important factor determining the sort of jobs that people get. He advances a number of arguments to support this claim:

1 Many studies which deny Britain is meritocratic nevertheless find considerable upward mobility from the working class. Thus the Essex study found that one-third of those in the service class were from working-class backgrounds.

2 Studies of social mobility tend to stress relative mobility rates and fail to emphasize the degree of openness that is demonstrated by the very high rates of absolute mobility. He compares the position to a one-metre dwarf and a three-metre giant in a hot air balloon. As they rise into the sky in the balloon, 'both clearly benefit from an enhanced view but the dwarf never gets his or her head to the level enjoyed by the giant'. Relying on relative mobility rates stresses the remaining difference in their viewpoints, whereas in reality both are much better off.

3 Saunders argues that relative inequality is further exaggerated by the odds ratios used in the Essex study to measure inequality of opportunity. To Saunders, 'odds ratios are extreme measures which combine success and failure chances in a single statistic and which therefore multiply up any apparent class advantages or disadvantages enjoyed by one group relative to another'. Thus, for example, they compare the chances of service-class children ending up in the working class with the chances of working-class children moving in the opposite direction. Because these two sets of odds are multiplied together it results in what appear to be very unequal opportunities in the statistics. Saunders thinks it is far better to use what he calls disparity ratios. These simply compare the odds on children from different origins ending up in the same class. For example, they might compare the chances of working-class and service-class children ending up in the service class. When calculated in this way they show much less extreme differences in mobility patterns.

4 According to Saunders, the relatively small inequalities discovered in such studies of social mobility might be largely explicable in terms of inherited intelligence, talent and motivation. Saunders says, 'what if the sons and daughters of doctors are on average, more talented or more motivated that the sons and daughters of dockers? If this were the case, evidence on relative mobility rates would of itself tell us nothing about the fairness of the system, for we would then expect children from certain origins to perform better than those from others.' Saunders then carries out a statistical study to try to demonstrate that middle-class children might do better than working-class ones simply because they are cleverer and work harder.

Evidence of meritocracy

In order to test his claims, Saunders uses evidence from the *National Child Development Survey*: a panel study or longitudinal study that has collected a wide range of information on (as far as possible) all children born between the 3rd and 9th of March 1958. The study used an initial panel of 17,414 children, and by 1991 the researchers were still succeeding in collecting data from 11,397 of the original panel.

In 1991, 6,795 individuals in the study were in full-time employment, and these were allocated to three classes on the basis of British government classifications. Saunders calls these the middle class, the intermediate class and the lower working class. Some 52 per cent had experienced intergenerational

mobility, and those with middle-class fathers were twice as likely as those with lower working-class fathers to end up as middle-class. This is a less marked difference than that found in most previous studies. The difference was somewhat greater when women were excluded from the analysis (as they were in the Oxford Mobility Study), with men from middle-class backgrounds having 2.6 times the chance of being in middle-class jobs compared with those from lower working-class backgrounds.

More importantly, from Saunders's point of view, the data provided a chance to try to test the significance of ability in determining people's class destinations. All children took tests of their verbal and non-verbal abilities at ages 7, 11, and 16. Although there was a statistical relationship with their class of origin (with middle-class children doing better than those from the other classes), there was a stronger relationship with the class they ended up in. Their abilities as children could have been related to inherited ability or to social and economic factors, but to Saunders it was highly significant that ability was closely linked to the sort of job they ended up with. This suggested that occupational status was closely linked to merit.

Saunders did also find, however, that substantial numbers of low-ability children (as measured in tests) ended up in the middle class. If occupation were entirely determined by ability, then only those who scored 49 or more in their general ability tests as children would have gained middle-class jobs. In fact, 38 per cent of those who gained middle-class jobs had scores lower than 49. Furthermore, the majority of them came from middle-class backgrounds: 32 per cent of this group were of middle-class origin, compared to just 17 per cent from lower working-class origins.

This might seem to undermine Saunders's claim that Britain is meritocratic, since it appears that class background as well as ability has an important influence on your chances. However, he goes on to point out that the idea of meritocracy also involves effort, and the differences in opportunity that were not explained by differences in ability might be explicable in terms of differences in effort. In short, they could result from middle-class children and young adults working harder.

The *Child Development Survey* included data on a number of factors that could be used to measure the amount of effort children were prepared to put into achieving success. Saunders uses three types of information to measure 'effort':

1 A motivation scale derived from questions put to the sample when 16 years old.
2 A measure of absenteeism from school based on truancy records and 'reports of trivial absences'.
3 A measure of 'job commitment' based on answers to attitude questionnaires the sample were given when they were 33 years old.

Saunders also examined data that could be used to measure the extent of social and economic deprivation. These included how often parents read to their children, the parents' educational qualifications, overcrowding in the childhood home, and so on. Saunders found that most of these factors made no difference to the class the children ended up in. Ability test scores remained the most powerful predictor, while measures of motivation were the second best predictor.

Saunders reaches three key conclusions on the basis of such evidence. First, he argues that 'ability correlates more strongly with class of destination than class of origin'. Second, 'ability and motivation are the key predictors of lower-working-class success and of middle-class failure'. Third, in view of the first two findings, he feels confident in claiming that 'class destinations reflect individual merit (ability and motivation) much more than class background'.

Criticisms of Saunders

If Saunders were correct, it would mean that sociologists had greatly exaggerated the inequality of opportunity in Britain and that little needs to change to make Britain a genuine meritocracy. However, there are a number of flaws in Saunders's arguments and his interpretation of the research. First, Saunders excludes the unemployed and those in part-time employment from his analysis. These might be the very groups most disadvantaged by virtue of their class background.

Second, a number of the measures of ability and effort might themselves reflect class differences as much as real differences in the 'merit' of individuals. As Saunders himself notes, there is the possibility of class bias in ability tests. Measures of absenteeism and trivial absences might reflect the labelling and stereotypes of teachers (see Chapter 11 for details of labelling theory and education) as much as a real lack of motivation on the part of working-class pupils. Furthermore, factors such as ill-health and unsympathetic teachers might encourage children to be absent from school, and these factors in turn may be related to children's backgrounds.

It is not surprising if those from working-class backgrounds who have gained middle-class jobs appear more motivated in their work than those from middle-class backgrounds, since the former have all had substantial upward mobility and are likely to have experienced significant improvements in their living standards. Thus many of the measures used by Saunders may reflect social class differences rather