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## The Mobility Transition: Social Mobility Trends in the First Half of the Twenty-First Century

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**ABSTRACT** Trends in absolute rates of both career and intergenerational mobility in Britain since the 1950s are outlined and some of the cultural consequences of the resulting heterogeneity in class composition are briefly considered. It is argued that while supply-side factors – educational attainment, ability, etc. – may determine *who* has been mobile or not, aggregate rates and changes in aggregate rates are largely dictated by demand-side factors. But current trends in the composition of the working population are necessarily self-limiting. A forecast of the occupational structure in the first half of the twenty-first century together with the assumption of some continuity in the pattern of class advantages, indicates a 'mobility transition' in which trends are likely to reverse within the next thirty years or so. The long-run replacement of recruitment heterogeneity by homogeneity of social experience in the enlarged middle class suggests that, in contrast with present-day pluralism, there will emerge the structural conditions for a greater cultural uniformity and the onset of an era of orthodoxy.

**KEYWORDS** career mobility, cultural change, intergenerational mobility, mobility transition, occupational structure, social mobility trends.

Scepticism about sociological predictions may be methodologically well grounded and persuasively argued (Boudon 1986; Runciman 1993) but it does not address either our natural curiosity nor yet absolve us from our responsibility for theoretical speculation about the directions in which society might be headed (Kumar 1978, 1995). However, any notions we might entertain about the future should be well grounded in an understanding of the present and, regrettably, we have little evidence about trends in social mobility in Britain over any extended length of time. Even to say anything about the present involves a fair amount of extrapolation and surmise. Nevertheless, how much social mobility there is, and is likely to be in the future, are important questions both in their own right and also because of their social and cultural consequences. So, in this context, we must do the best we can with what we have.

Social mobility rates measure the enduring patterns of institutionalised segregation of social strata (Smith 1966:162; Blackburn and Mann 1979:23). Even if the connection may be loosening (Prandy and Blackburn 1997), the position of occupational groups in the labour market is still associated with inequalities of income,

respect and the influence their members can collectively or severally command (Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992). That is why in terms of social class we should always regard occupational mobility as social mobility, if only sideways. But while there are other and more obvious ways of measuring the different facets of social inequality, mobility between these variously and variably unequal strata is an index of the rigidity or permeability of social divisions. It indicates the degree of salience of stratification as a continuing characteristic of the social structure.

Mobility – absolute mobility that is – is part of our direct social experience. Social opportunities or risks can motivate or discourage personal aspirations or collective resentments which have wide cultural and political repercussions (Miles 1999). This paper is concerned with the essentially simple but important matter of likely trends in absolute rates of mobility and their consequences. It does not primarily address the more contentious questions of equality of opportunity or relative mobility chances. But as Goldthorpe *et al.* (1980:121) argued, it is absolute mobility rates which are relevant to questions of class formation and action. What we are concerned with is whether opportunities are growing or declining for, say, the son or daughter of a bus driver or a factory worker to become a marketing manager or a surgeon. Similarly, is the risk of a manager's son or daughter being able to find no employment except as a shop assistant or on the assembly line increasing or decreasing? Will there, in the twenty-first century, still be an accessible path from the shop floor or the photocopying room to professional qualifications or managerial rank?

Increases in upward mobility reflect real improvements in the opportunities available even if the same opportunities reduce the risk of a lower grade job for others. Indeed, it is hard to imagine, given the economic, cultural, motivational and other advantages attributed to a middle-class upbringing, in what circumstances widening opportunities to pursue an interesting and well-paid career would not also be at least equally available to middle-class children as well as any others. These trends, furthermore, affect not only the upwardly or downwardly mobile themselves: they determine the qualitative context of social experience for everyone else too. Feelings of relative deprivation amongst those left behind or the sense of established values under threat from invasive upstarts may be sharpened by changes in the rate of upward mobility. Noticeable changes in downward mobility rates may sharpen or dull the awareness of class divisions for those remaining on either side of a class boundary. Such considerations, then, are likely to continue to be not only structurally but culturally significant in the new century, as, I believe, they have already been in shaping the ideas and values of the later twentieth.

### **Present Trends in Career Mobility**

Mobility can be thought of as consisting of inter- and intragenerational movements, of which, as we shall see, intragenerational or 'career' mobility is the

more important. Career mobility rates obviously do not give a complete picture of the social mobility occurring in society. In addition to educational attainments before entry to the job market, there are other, relatively unexplored, paths from one social class to another apart from the occupational career: marriage or inheritance, for example. The experience of those with interrupted careers, such as many younger women who may withdraw from the employed labour force for a time, as was customary in the past for most married women, is not well represented in the sort of longitudinal data we have considered here.

In any case, much intragenerational or career mobility may be a matter of countermobility. That is to say, in the course of their working lives many people make their way back to something like their social origins after starting out in jobs of a higher or lower status (Goldthorpe 1980:123 Table 5.1; Marshall *et al.*:109 Table 5.7). It may be thought that career mobility therefore exaggerates the overall level of long-term intergenerational mobility. Conversely, however, purely intergenerational comparisons by the same token tend to underplay the total experience of social mobility in the population as a whole.

The growing discontinuities in occupational careers on the one hand and the persistence of origin effects evident in the appreciable amount of countermobility on the other, imply both a blurring of boundaries and an increasing element of change, not only in the course of people's lives but, at a more general level, in the structures of class formation too.

Most mobility between social classes occurs in the course of the working life. The common assumption that, in Britain, social mobility is principally via the educational system and that, on completion of their full-time education a school-leaver's or graduate's social position is fixed for life is a myth (Noble 1974). Marshall and his colleagues found that career mobility accounted for 54 per cent of all the intergenerational mobility between the three broadly defined class categories (Service, Intermediate and Working Class) they used in their 1984 survey (Marshall *et al.* 1989). They found more upward than downward career mobility. Sixty-nine per cent of the men and 78 per cent of the women in professional and managerial (Service Class) jobs had reached their present position after starting out in intermediate or manual working-class jobs. Amongst manual workers, by contrast, 63 per cent had been in manual work from their first job onwards, whether they originated in working-class families themselves or had been intergenerationally mobile (Marshall *et al.* 1989:109 Table 5.7). A single snapshot sample like this, however, has the disadvantage for our purposes of including a wide range of people with very diverse experiences. The oldest of Marshall *et al.*'s respondents could have started work as school leavers in the hungry 1930s while the youngest, children of the 1960s, would only have entered the very different job market of the 1980s.

Information about career mobility in the working population within defined periods is fortunately available from two sources relating to the 1950s and the 1970s.

In the 1971–81 Census Longitudinal Study there is data on 99,495 men and 40,277 women who were economically active in both years (OPCS 1988). There was also an earlier study of labour mobility among a national random sample of people aged 15 and over in Great Britain which included over 4,000 men and 1,300 women employed throughout the years from 1953 to 1963 (Harris and Clausen 1967). Detailed comparisons between these studies are difficult because of revisions to the Registrar General's Social Class scale (cf. Routh 1987). The four-class version used here, however, avoids most of the resulting reassignment problems, particularly those between Classes I and II and between Classes III Non-manual and IV Non-manual, so that we can get a reasonably good picture of change over a period of nearly thirty years (see Table 1).

Of those who were in the professions or management in 1971, about 79 per cent of the men and 76 per cent of the women apparently remained in such jobs through the following ten years. The figures for 1953–63, however, were higher still at 88 per cent of men and 87 per cent of women. However, as a result of the growing number of professional and managerial jobs over the period, by 1981 37 per cent of men and 38 per cent of women at this level had been recruited from other occupational classes. The 1963 figures were 24 per cent of men and only 18 per cent of women. In fact 21 per cent of men in management and the professions in 1981 (16 per cent in 1963) had been manual workers ten years earlier. In 1981 three out of four men in skilled manual jobs and a similar proportion of women in lower grade non-manual jobs had remained at the same level as ten years before. But even these high rates of occupational continuity were down from those revealed in the 1963 survey, when nine out of ten men in skilled manual employment and eight out of ten women in the 'other

Table 1  
Career Mobility across Four Occupational Classes in Two Ten Year Periods

	1953–63 %	1971–81 %
<b>Men</b>		
Downwardly mobile	9.4	14.2
Upwardly mobile	12.2	30.8
<b>Women</b>		
Downwardly mobile	9.9	15.2
Upwardly mobile	11.2	19.1

*Note:* Mobility between the following four classes: Professional and Managerial (RG Cl.I and II); Other Non-Manual (RG. Cl.III NM and IV NM); Skilled Manual (RG Cl.III M); Other Manual (RG. Cl.IVM and V).

*Sources:* Calculated from Amelia Harris and Rosemary Clausen, *Labour Mobility in Britain 1953–1963*, Government Social Survey, HMSO, 1967, Table 52, p.51; Census 1971–1981, *The Longitudinal Study*, Government Statistical Service, 1988, Table 2.

non-manual' category had been in the same sorts of jobs for a decade. Overall upward career mobility exceeded downward in both periods. In 1971–81 downward occupational career mobility had increased by more than 50 per cent as compared with 1953–63 for both men and women. Upward career mobility in the ten years 1971–81 was 80 per cent more frequent for women than in 1953–63 and for men had increased by two and a half times.

It is impossible to believe that changes of this magnitude could be entirely an artefact of unresolved revisions to the classification over and above those dealt with in reducing the number of categories as described. The view that occupational career mobility, both upward and downward, significantly increased seems irresistible (for an opposing view, though unsupported by evidence, see Goldthorpe 1992).

The 1971–81 *Longitudinal Study* also shows that (a) these moves were not evenly distributed across occupational careers and (b) there were differences in the likelihood of movement at different ages as between men and women (Noble 1995). For men upward moves tended to occur early in their careers and the rate of mobility then declined with age. Nevertheless, 39 per cent of the upwardly mobile men were already 35 or more in 1971 as were three out of four of those who experienced some downward mobility in the period. Half of the upwardly mobile women were already 35 in 1971 as were 61 per cent of those who were downwardly mobile between then and 1981.

These figures underline the questionable validity of inferring secular trends from comparisons of younger and older cohorts in the same sample. To assume that men and women reach 'occupational maturity' in their 30s (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980, 1987; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993; Halpin 1994) is mistaken. In addition, there are higher mortality rates amongst working-class men, particularly in middle age (Goldblatt 1989). Together these would lead to an under-estimate of real changes in mobility rates over time if a comparison of age cohorts were used. The only way we could really tell whether mobility might have increased or decreased would be to compare population samples independently drawn at different points in time (Miles 1999). Simple intergenerational comparisons although they tend to exaggerate the degree of class segregation, will help to bring these issues into better focus. Though the evidence on British intergenerational mobility trends is sparse, its implications nevertheless raise important questions.

### **Intergenerational Comparisons**

Unfortunately, recent British evidence on intergenerational mobility is confined to a very limited number of sources and these provide direct data only on the apparent mobility of men. In the best of these (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986; Goldthorpe *et al.*: 2nd edn 1987), over the eleven years 1972–83 downward mobility of men whose fathers were in management or the professions declined while upward

mobility amongst the sons of manual working-class fathers increased. In the 1983 sample fewer than half of them had followed in their fathers' footsteps and become manual workers themselves. More than one in five manual workers' sons were in professional or managerial (Service Class) jobs.

These trends can be confirmed for a rather longer time-span if we are prepared to resort to somewhat less fastidious methods. Using a manual/non-manual subdivision we can compare a number of studies spread out over thirty-five years (Noble 1995). Gallie's recent study of manual and non-manual workers indicates this division is 'likely to continue to have important implications both for people's lifestyles and for their wider life chances' (1996:471). This dichotomy is probably as useful as Goldthorpe and Payne's somewhat idiosyncratic three-class schema (1986; Goldthorpe *et al.* 1987); and careful examination, and where necessary regrouping, of the classifications used in the various studies makes possible a sufficient degree of consistency to reveal changes from one to another. From the 1949 (Glass 1954; Miller 1960) and 1951 (Benjamin 1958) studies, through 1972 (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980; 1987) to the 1984 survey of Marshall and his colleagues (Marshall *et al.* 1989), that is over thirty-five years, upward mobility from manual working-class origins steadily increased while intergenerational mobility in the other direction, from non manual middle-class family origins to working-class destinations continued to decline.

Both comparisons, over eleven years and over the thirty-five years to the mid 1980s agree in essentially the same picture of mobility trends. They differ however from the evidence on career mobility trends considered earlier which showed increases in both upward *and* downward mobility over much the same period. This reflects the contrasting consequences of change at the level of the individual career with middle-class to working-class movements increasingly a matter of mid-career change and less one of first entry to the market, and, at a more general level, structural change in the labour force as a whole.

Besides the availability of career opportunities it represents, it is the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the social classes which social mobility has brought about which is probably of still greater significance in its cultural and political consequences (Miles 1999). Even in the professional and managerial middle class, the so-called Service Class, less than a third of men in the surveys of 1972, 1983 and 1984 had grown up in Service Class families (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986, Marshall *et al.* 1989). For the socially stable then, as well as for the mobile, in these conditions shared experience of upbringing and education, common cultural assumptions and values and shared political attitudes among colleagues, neighbours and social peers cannot be taken for granted. The 1974 follow-up study to the Oxford Mobility Survey found that the socially mobile usually maintain their family connections across the class boundaries (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980, 1987). Cross-class affiliations of this kind between parents and grown-up children, between spouses or siblings or other relatives and

between friends, are strongly associated with the de-alignment of class position and political partisanship (see Crewe and Denner 1985).

With the exception of the 1949 study (Glass 1954), in every one of the inter-generational mobility studies, half or more of non-manual middle-class men originated in working-class families. So the growing non-manual middle-class has not been predominantly self-recruiting for almost all the past half-century. At the same time the proportion of men in the working class with middle-class fathers seems to have increased rather than decreased as might have been assumed from the falling rate of downward intergenerational mobility (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980:87; Goldthorpe 1992). This is because the number of manual jobs contracted even faster, so that the declining numbers of originally middle-class recruits to manual jobs nevertheless became a larger proportion of the class as a whole. This seriously challenges the argument that with declining downward mobility, an increasingly self-recruited working-class was likely to develop a more thorough-going proletarian class-consciousness and political militancy (Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980; Goldthorpe 1992). If the results of the British general elections from 1979 to 1992 had already dented that expectation, then perhaps the evidence from this series of mobility studies can in part explain why. The structural basis for a strongly developed class-cultural identity in the middle class has been absent for more than a generation and has been weakening in the working class too. These accelerating changes in personal circumstances and social position have broken the continuity of experience from generation to generation without severing their intimate social ties and made apparent social equals of people of quite different social backgrounds. They provide the structural context for the loss of traditional reference points, for a growing need to make individualised choices without a common set of value assumptions and a shared culture based on shared common experience. These are the cultural discontinuities and uncertainties which at a personal level have provided the substratum of the process of postmodernisation (e.g. Crook, Pakulski and Waters 1992).

Are these conditions likely to persist into the new century or can we anticipate some change or reaction? The answer, as I hope to show in the next section, seems to be that the question is more complex than that stark pair of alternatives suggests but that, after all, is how things usually turn out.

### **Changing Structural Demand**

Changes in mobility rates in the twenty-first century will increasingly be structurally determined. In his analysis of the occupational attainments at age 33 of the 1958 born cohort in the NCDS *Longitudinal Study*, Saunders found that recruitment to the various occupational groups was strongly associated with individual ability and motivation. Class of origin accounted for very little of the variance in explaining the relationships between social origins and occupational destinations



(Saunders 1996, 1997). These estimates have been questioned, notably by Breen and Goldthorpe, who, using more narrowly defined criteria, arrived at a rather lower, though still significant estimate of the contribution of ability and motivation to occupational placement (Breen and Goldthorpe 1999). But a supply of suitably qualified or gifted people will not of itself create the opportunities that will make the most of their abilities unless there is a matching level of demand. In other words, personal characteristics and qualifications may determine *who* will be mobile and who will be denied the opportunities or protected from the risks of mobility. *How much* mobility there is, however, is determined by structural demand. If present-day Britain is already as meritocratic as Saunders has shown it to be, then for all practical purposes how much mobility there is will be almost completely determined by demand-side factors.

Looking back across the twentieth century indeed, as Payne has suggested (1977, 1987), the distribution of occupations already appears to have been the principal factor in the changing pattern of mobility we have observed. There seems no reason to suppose that, in the early part of the twenty-first century, ability and personal motivation will become less important. But, however that may be, a constant degree of class-related discrimination would also mean that any fluctuations in mobility patterns must be determined by demand-side factors. Social or occupational inter-class mobility rates will therefore depend upon the demand-side position and it is to that we must now turn.

Changes in the occupational structure during the twentieth century have been the product of two separate but interrelated processes. One of these has been the transformation of the industrial economy with the decline in employment in the manufacturing sector, from over 39 per cent of the working population in 1951 to 18 per cent in 1997, and the growth of service sector jobs from under 44 per cent in 1951 to over 76 per cent in 1997 (see Noble 1995: Table 4, and DfEE 1998: Table 1.2). The other factor has been the changing pattern of employment within industries as a consequence of technological and organisational change reducing the need for manual workers but increasing the employment, proportionately and absolutely, of managerial, professional, technical, financial and clerical workers.

The growth of employment in the services sector, however, really only took off in the 1960s. The rapid contraction in manufacturing employment began in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s. Most of the alteration in the pattern of employment before then is therefore attributable to organisational changes within industrial sectors rather than to sectoral changes (Goldthorpe 1992; Noble 1995). In the immediate future both organisational and sectoral changes are likely to continue, though probably to a diminishing extent. There would seem to be a fairly obvious limit to how far either can go: we cannot all be managers, there must be someone left to be managed. The end of the trend could be approaching quite soon in the first half of the twenty-first century.

Table 2  
Occupational Distribution in the United Kingdom 1981–2026

	Percentages			
	1981	1996	2011	2026
Management and Administrators	13.1	16.5	20.5	21.5
Professionals	8.4	9.5	12.5	13.5
Associated Professionals and Technical Occupations	7.2	9.9	13.5	14.0
Clerical and Secretarial	16.8	15.9	7.5	5.0
Craft and Skilled Manual	17.4	12.4	10.5	10.0
Personal and Protective Services	7.3	10.0	14.5	15.0
Sales	7.1	7.5	10.5	11.0
Plant and Machine Operatives	12.1	10.1	9.5	9.0
Other Occupations	10.7	8.3	1.0	1.0

Sources: 1981, 1996 from DfEE *Labour Market and Skill Trends 1997–1998*:36–7, Figs 4.1 and 4.2.

The current increase in occupational mobility is what we have been led to expect by theories of the industrial society and convergence (Kerr *et al.* 1960, 1993; Galbraith 1967; Aron 1967). The view that such expectations have not been fulfilled ‘once the effects of structural shifts are allowed for’ (Goldthorpe 1992:136; Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993:chap.1) is not only incompatible with the data especially that on career mobility, but resembles the claim that Hamlet is no tragedy if one discounts the scenes in which the Prince appears. The essence of the theory of industrial society and convergence is precisely that mobility trends are one of the consequences of structural change. Yet the theory deals with what is necessarily a transitional phase in social development, and it is worth considering what happens after the transition.

To begin with then, we need to have some idea of how the occupational structure is likely to change so as to be able to estimate the future pattern of demand for different types of labour. I have extended projections for the occupational structure from *Labour Market and Skill Trends 1997–1998* (DfEE 1998) beyond the DfEE’s 2006 calculations as shown in Table 2. Many relevant factors here too are, of course, quite unpredictable. Economic growth and decline represent major uncertainties. Unforeseeable sectoral and organisational changes driven by still unimaginable technological innovations or unpredictable market opportunities of the kind we have seen at work shaping and reshaping the economy since the 1930s will contribute to these developments. It seems a fair bet, however, that whatever they are, they will not be labour intensive. Many jobs which did not exist at the start of our series (see Table 2) may flourish and multiply while by the end large tracts of employment will have shrunk into insignificance or practically disappeared altogether. Improvements in the numbers of new entrants to the job market with academic and technical qualifications are likely to continue, though in itself that will probably merely

accelerate the process of accreditation depreciation rather than bring about any great changes in mobility rates or class formation. However, without casting caution entirely aside, we can perhaps relax our grip on it sufficiently to suggest the pattern of change set out in Table 2.

Managers and administrators will continue to increase in number to account for more than one in five of all workers by 2011. Professionals and technical occupations will also continue to expand as a proportion of all employment, though both categories will grow relatively more slowly in the next century. The proportion of women here and in many areas of employment where traditionally they have been in a minority is likely to grow, but that will be offset by an anticipated steep decline, mainly as a result of further Information Technology applications, in clerical and secretarial jobs where they have predominated. As the slow-down in manufacturing in Britain and the transfer of production away to lower wage or higher productivity labour markets elsewhere will very probably persist, so skilled and semi-skilled manual jobs, mostly providing employment for men are also likely to contract, though more slowly. 'Other' jobs, including those in the extractive industries and agriculture are likely to dwindle drastically. At the same time, employment in protective services, distribution and transport are unlikely to decline. Sales will probably remain a significant area of employment, especially for women and some kinds of production, construction and maintenance jobs may reach a virtually irreducible minimum.

Before the First World War about 75 per cent of the working population were manual workers (Routh 1987). Even after 1945 two out of three British workers were in manual jobs, the proportion declining only after the 1960s to reach about 40 per cent in the 1990s (Noble 1995). Looking ahead, the downward trend may well continue still further, though the size of the manual worker population is likely to stabilise well short of the limiting case of total extinction (Payne 1998). The aggregate effect of all this is that over the course of about a hundred years, Britain will have changed from a society with about a quarter of the population in the white-collar middle class and three-quarters in the manual working class to something just short of a reversal of those proportions. The implications of that change for trends in occupational and social mobility are serious and possibly surprising.

### **The Mobility Transition**

The estimation of future mobility trends, as we have already argued, must mainly rely on demand-side considerations. On the supply-side, the demographic composition of the working population can have an influence on opportunity patterns. For instance, the employment of women, 48 per cent of the labour force in 1997, is still increasing in all industrial and occupational sectors. While the total number at work is unlikely to grow very much more, there is room for considerable

redistribution across the range of occupations. Again, whilst the average age of the total population has been rising, growing numbers are retiring early. In 1971 more than 80 per cent of men in their early 60s were economically active but by 1996 the proportion was only about half (CSO 1997:Chart 4.1). Early retirements do not necessarily create vacancies for younger workers, but any major reversal of the current trend would seriously restrict future opportunities. That is also true of possible changes in class fertility differentials, which can affect mobility rates in certain circumstances. Any changes we might anticipate in variables such as these would generally be of minor importance and would tend to lower intergenerational mobility rates, though their effects on career mobility would be more uncertain.

As far as long-term changes in absolute mobility rates are concerned, we can, to start with, make three fairly reasonable presuppositions:

- (a) Occupational classes will continue to be ranked hierarchically in terms of the advantages and disadvantages of class membership;
- (b) Mobility rates will principally be demand determined;
- (c) Present trends in the occupational structure logically cannot persist *ad infinitum*. As the projections outlined in Table 2 suggest, the recent rapid growth in professional and managerial occupations and the decline in manual employment must at some stage slow down and reach a limit.

A schematic account of the changing class structure over a series of thirty-year intervals to the middle of the new century is sketched in Figure 1. In this outline the occupational groups of Table 2 have been assigned to three classes, namely Managerial and Professional, broadly comparable to Goldthorpe's Service Class; an Intermediate Class comprising Associated Professional and Technical Occupations, Clerical and Secretarial employment and Sales; and, thirdly, a Working Class consisting of Craft and Skilled Manual Workers; Personal and Protective Services, Plant and Machine Operatives and Other Occupations, mainly in mining and agriculture. Figure 1 shows the rapid changes of the last third of the twentieth century slowing down and stabilizing in the first half of the twenty-first.

The next step is to set out a simple arithmetic model of the kind deployed by Boudon (Boudon 1974), which will enable us to see how these changes in the occupational class structure will affect mobility rates. Across each interval there will be some self-recruitment in each class and some mobility between classes. Inheritance factors can be extrapolated for the 1960s and 1990s from the inflow percentages discovered in the surveys done in the 1970s and 1980s (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986). The inheritance factor for the Intermediate Class seems on that basis likely to remain more or less constant (with self-recruitment at about a third) with the outward balance evenly divided between the upwardly and downwardly mobile. Where downward mobility has produced a shortfall as in the estimate for the 1960s, it

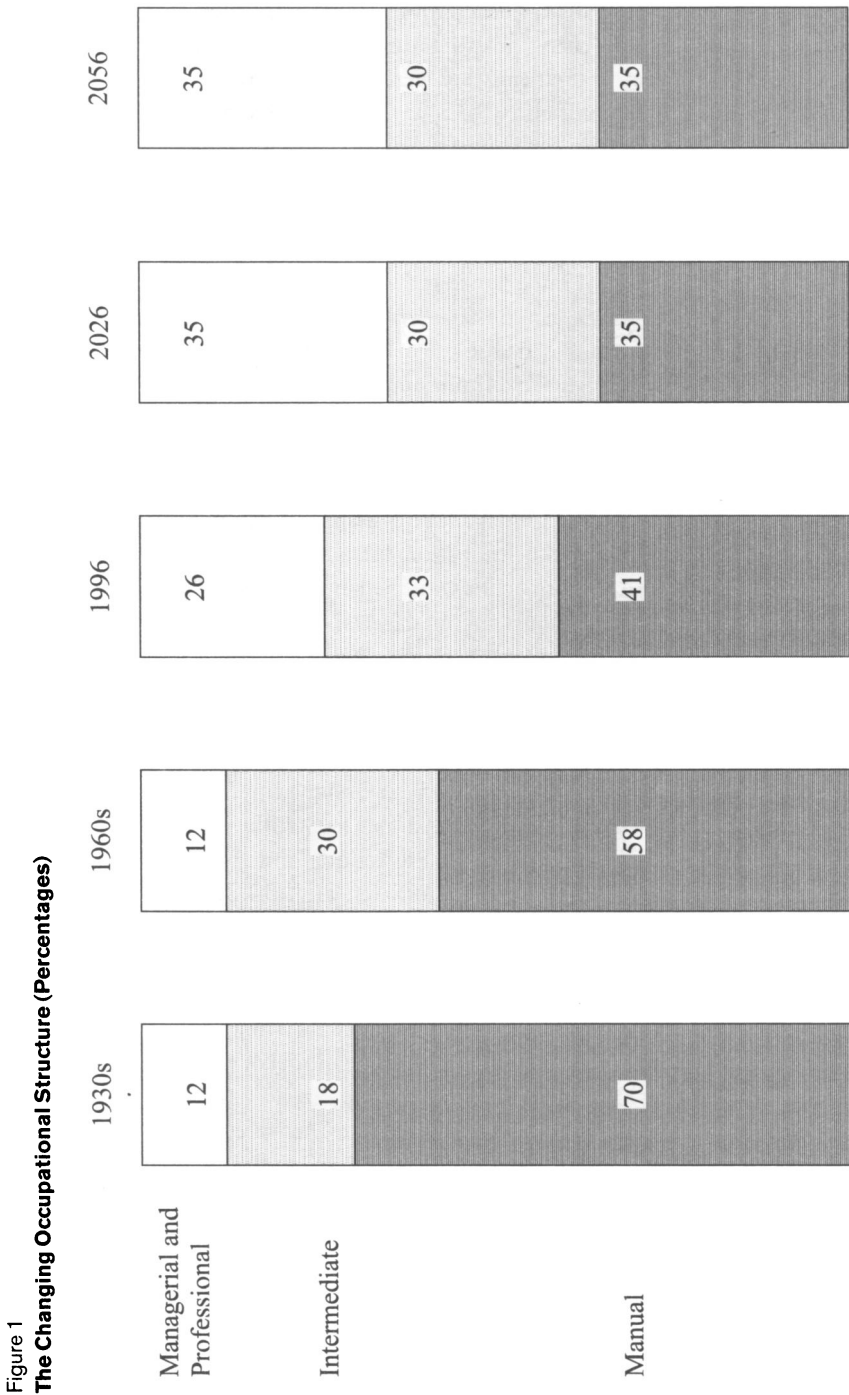
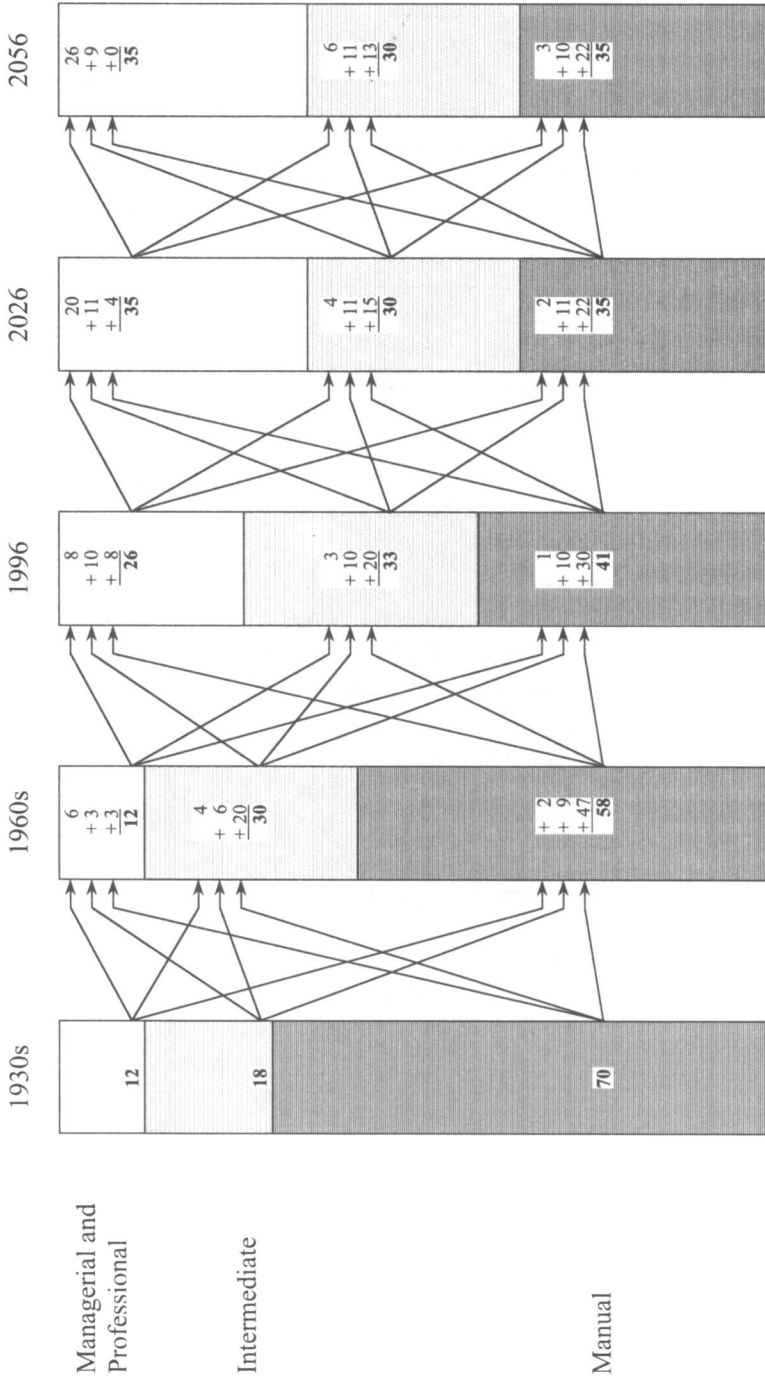


Figure 2  
The Changing Occupational Structure (Percentages)



has been assumed that self-recruitment will outweigh upward mobility from below with something in the region of a 2:1 advantage.

As downward mobility out of the Managerial and Professional Class declines, inheritance is estimated to increase from 50 per cent in the 1960s, to 66 per cent in 1996 and to stabilise at about 75 per cent thereafter. A strong element of meritocracy in the system entails that some downward mobility will necessarily persist (Saunders 1997) and from the Professional and Managerial Class this is allocated between destinations in the Intermediate and Working Classes on a 2:1 ratio respectively.

The level of working-class upward mobility is determined simply as a consequence of the recruitment shortfalls brought about by the changing size of the other classes and the downward mobility of some of those originating there. The outcome of these assumptions is set out in Figure 2. In each cell in the figure the inflow percentages are presented in the same Managerial, Intermediate and Working Class order of origins (numbers have been rounded).

Though the categories are differently defined, the model produces a pattern of intergenerational social mobility generally consistent with the findings of the surveys referred to earlier. By the 1960s, even with two out of three from managerial/professional origins remaining in that class, as a result of its doubling as a proportion of the population over the preceding thirty years or so (from 12 per cent to 26 per cent) the strong inheritance factor produced only a minority of the expanded category and only about half the Managerial Class was self-recruited and half had been upwardly mobile from other social origins. By the 1990s upward mobility provided two-thirds of the members of this class (cf. Goldthorpe and Payne 1986: 66.9 per cent in 1983). Homogeneity of background, however, re-emerges after the turn of the century and then rapidly increases as the occupational class structure ceases to change. In the shrinking Working Class, however, in spite of declining downward mobility from other strata, the downwardly mobile have come to account for a growing proportion of an increasingly heterogeneous class. More surprisingly, with the eventual stabilisation of the occupational structure, the degree of self-recruitment seems set to remain at the same low level.

Increasing self-recruitment during the expansion of the Managerial Class not only reflects increased demand but, in the long run, an increased supply too. The end result must, therefore, be a substantial reduction in upward mobility from the other social classes. With the anticipated stabilisation of the occupational class structure by mid-century, exceptional individuals apart, long-range intergenerational demanded mobility, especially from working-class origins into the managerial middle class, seems set to become a thing of the past. The era of increasing mobility between classes and the diversity of social origins among the professional and managerial middle class, which sociologists have taken so long to recognise, will be seen to have been a transitional phase.

This 'mobility transition', from relatively low rates of boundary crossing through

the currently high rates of movement and back again may be a useful way of visualising the long-term development of occupational class structures in industrialised societies as the analogous 'demographic transition' has been with reference to their populations (Wrong 1967:22). In the same way, we can anticipate exceptions and variations from the pattern. Other kinds of inequality could conceivably become more significant in relation to the occupationally grounded class divisions considered here. The present discussion has confined itself to the British case, but whatever the effects of continuing globalisation, populations will still exist in real space and class structures will still have a geographical reference. Just as mortality rates cannot go on falling forever, so there are self-evident limits to a continuing increase in upward intergenerational mobility. In the conditions of flexible capitalism, with more and more emphasis on short-term contracts and discontinuous career patterns (Sennett 1998), job changes will continue at a high level but it seems probable these will increasingly be confined within class boundaries in the future.

As for the consequences of the mobility transition, Dahrendorf (1959) and Wright Mills (see Boudon 1986) argued that a decrease in upward intergenerational mobility would lead to the re-emergence of class identity and a return to class conflict. This, however, seems unlikely given that the anticipated reduction in the size of the manual working class will not result in greater homogeneity of background origins and, therefore, will probably not generate greater social and cultural cohesiveness or political solidarity. The continuing presence of a large minority of the downwardly mobile amongst the reduced manual working class will inhibit the emergence of specifically class consciousness and class action. Working-class politics will not return to the proletarian conflict politics of the past.

The present-day middle class with its diversity of origins, however, will be replaced by a socially and culturally far more homogeneous grouping who will share a similar education, similar occupational standing and market conditions, and similar social origins. Increasing opportunities for women in management and the professions and the decline of clerical and secretarial employment will accelerate that process, reducing the proportion of cross managerial/intermediate class male/female partnerships. The absence of cross-class affiliations, especially intergenerational connections with the manual working class could well have the sort of consequences for middle-class attitudes and values anticipated by Gellner (1992). The absence of mobility consequent upon the re-stabilisation of the occupational structure could bring an end, at least amongst the members of the Service Class, to the present general acceptance of egalitarian values. Their predominantly similar social and cultural origins, and common educational and occupational experience, we would expect to incline the future members of this class towards a range of taken-for-granted expectations and assumptions which would tend to focus on continuity and sameness rather than on individuality, discontinuity and disorder as in the recent past.



The pre-postmodernist theoretical assumption here is that values will continue to reflect circumstances and experience. Thus a more widely shared inter-generational continuity of experience, a greater similarity of education and an increased homogeneity of origins amongst their social peers is likely to bring about a de-relativisation of attitudes and values. The managerial and professional middle class today is confronted with a diversity of personal and vicarious experience, and awareness of variation in opinions and more enduring beliefs, normative patterns and goals. By contrast, at the end of the mobility transition, culturally more orthodox patterns of aspirations and expectations are likely to emerge. It may not be possible to say what the character of the orthodoxy might be, what people will be orthodox about, or for how long. The point is, however, that the structural conditions for a much greater degree of conformity round a normative consensus that has been lacking in the socially mobile, heterogeneous middle class of the late twentieth century will re-emerge in the early twenty-first. That may not appeal very much to many of us in the present generation, but at least, as sociologists, we may be able to understand in part how it has come about.

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