



CLASS MOBILITY IN MODERN BRITAIN

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CLASS MOBILITY IN MODERN BRITAIN

ROSEMARY CROMPTON

Given the high quality of the output of the Nuffield Social Mobility Group, critical comments must be made with due caution. However, despite the fact that the article by Goldthorpe and Llewellyn, 'Class Mobility in Modern Britain', *Sociology*, vol. 11, no. 2, is methodologically rigorous and closely argued, the extent to which existing mobility data can be utilized in the analysis of the *class* structure of contemporary Britain may still be questioned. However, it should be stressed that these comments focus on the appropriateness of current mobility studies for class analysis, and should not be interpreted as challenging the value of these studies – which have provided much-needed empirical data – in a more general sense.

Goldthorpe and Llewellyn correctly argue that questions of social mobility are highly relevant to recent neo-Weberian class theories.² That is, 'mobility chances', as a vital element in 'life chances', crucially delineate the 'classes' so identified. However, for the purposes of class analysis, a drawback of most survey inquiries into mobility since the Second World War is that they 'have been conducted in terms of hierarchies of prestige or socio-economic status rather than of class' (p. 257). Accordingly, Goldthorpe and Llewellyn construct a sevenfold schema of class positions using the 36-category version of the Hope-Goldthorpe occupational scale. This schema brings together groups of occupations whose 'incumbents will typically share in broadly similar *market* and *work* situations – which, following Lockwood's well-known discussion, we take as the two major components of class position' (p. 259 emphasis in original). As the schema is representative of social *classes*, rather than being a hierarchy of occupational prestige or socio-economic status, they emphasize that '... the schema should not be regarded as having – nor should it be expected to have – a consistently hierarchical form' (p. 260).

Nevertheless, when they later present their fascinating data on 'work-life' mobility, the sevenfold class schema is collapsed into a threefold *hierarchy*, and utilized as such. (Classes 1 and 2 are grouped together, followed by 3, 4, and 5, then 6 and 7). In principle such a procedure is not objectionable. Given the concepts employed in the identification of class positions – i.e. 'market' and 'work' situations – it is clearly possible to rank occupations as 'better' or 'worse' in these respects. However, a comparison of the threefold class hierarchy with the 36 categories of the original Hope-Goldthorpe scale reveals the possibility of some rather odd cases of upward (or conversely downward) mobility.³ For example, a move, say, from machine setter or printer (H-G category 22, Class 6 on the sevenfold scale) to a caretaker, doorman, (H-G category 34, Class 3 on the sevenfold scale), or shop salesman (H-G category 28, Class 3 on the sevenfold scale), would be characterized as 'upward' class mobility. I would suggest that, in terms of 'market' and 'work' situations, the description of such moves as 'upward' is doubtful.

Empirical evidence presented by Goldthorpe and Llewellyn demonstrates that both the amount and range of social mobility experienced by their sample of over ten thousand is such as to challenge a number of theses generated by neo-Weberian class theory. These theses include 'closure' (the restriction of mobility at the upper and lower levels of the occupational hierarchy); the 'buffer zone' (mobility as primarily short-range movement

around the middle levels of the occupational hierarchy); and 'counter-balance' (the restriction of 'work-life' mobility resulting from a growing emphasis on professional and technical qualifications). Goldthorpe and Llewellyn suggests that these three theses – which, apparently, have been empirically disproved – were initially developed because their originators '(took) the evidence of wide and persisting inequalities of opportunity . . . as if it were at the same time evidence of relatively severe and unchanging constraints on the extent of mobility' (p. 277). However, whilst Goldthorpe and Llewellyn would not deny that opportunities *are* still unequal, they argue that long-term changes in the occupational structure have, so to speak, 'forced' the upward mobility of men of lower-class origins (p. 278). Census data reveal that whilst the proportion of men engaged in manual occupations has declined (particularly since the end of the Second World War), there has been a corresponding increase in non-manual occupations; thus social mobility is built in to the changing occupational structure.

This fact certainly explains both the extent and range of occupational mobility manifested by the Nuffield sample. If, however, the sociologist wishes to claim that changes in the occupational structure more or less directly reflect changes in the *class* structure (and here there is an interesting parallel with 'post-industrial' theorists), some fairly important assumptions must be made. In particular, it must be assumed that the *class* position of particular occupations remains more or less constant over time. More specifically, if we use the concepts employed by Goldthorpe and Llewellyn, then the 'market' and 'work' situations of occupations within each of the seven categories must be assumed to be roughly the same in 1972 as they were in 1921 – the earliest date at which the occupation of a respondent's father could have been identified. However, given the rapidity of technical and social change, can this assumption be made with any confidence? Rather, it may be suggested that the last few decades have not only seen changes in occupational structure, but also considerable changes in occupational *content* – even though the occupational 'label' may remain the same.

Detailed studies of occupations are not particularly common – and another source of frustration is that the extent of technical and economic change noted above renders many studies obsolete within a short time. For example, the 'market' situation of the 'affluent worker' was radically transformed within a decade of the publication of the original research, and the 'craft printer' as described by Blauner is rapidly becoming the Blue Whale – if not the Dodo – of the printing industry.⁴ Furthermore, the speed of technological change may mean that particular occupations are transformed within a few years of their initial emergence – computer-related jobs would be a good example.⁵ Nevertheless, on the basis of the available evidence it does seem possible to argue that there are critical points within the occupational structure where 'market' and 'work' situations have changed considerably, although occupational labels have been retained.

Take, for example, the clerk – who could without exaggeration be described as the 'white-collar prototype'. Braverman has recently documented the rationalization, mechanization, and more recently, computerization of clerical work, which has resulted in the evolution of a mass clerical labour force.⁶ Whatever the debate about the extent and nature of these changes, there can be little doubt that to be a 'clerk' in 1921, 1931 – or even 1941 – implied something very different – in terms of 'market' and 'work' situations – from being a 'clerk' in 1972. It may be objected that the mass clerical labour force is in fact composed largely of women, and that non-manual men are to be found in occupations of a 'higher professional, administrative, and managerial character' (p. 278). In response, two points may be made: (i) That there is evidence that some 'professional and managerial' occupations are suffering a relative decline in 'market' and 'work' situations,⁷ and (ii) that, as

a result of the changing nature of clerical work content, occupations once described as 'clerical' may now be classified as 'administrative or managerial' – in short, that what has occurred is not so much a structural upward shift, as a reclassification of occupations.

A recent study of technicians has described in some detail how their 'market' and 'work' situations declined – relative to manual workers – during the 'sixties'.⁸ Given that a relative scepticism is being argued concerning occupational labels, the description of one particular managerial strategy for dealing with the problem of blocked promotion chances is of some interest. In response to complaints, the management introduced a complex grading structure *within* a group of draughtsmen which led from 'draughtsman' to 'senior design engineer'.⁹ Here we have a reasonably straightforward example of an attempt to compensate for blocked mobility (surely in itself a deterioration of the market situation), by a conscious manipulation of occupational titles.

In summary, I would suggest that the kind of evidence indicated above provides reasonable grounds for doubt as to the extent to which changes in the occupational structure – as indicated by occupational labels – accurately reflects changes in the class structure of contemporary Britain. I would not wish to suggest that occupation is unrelated to class position. Rather, I am arguing that the class position of a number of occupations has changed over time, and that these changes should be recognized in studies of class mobility. That is, the changes in occupational content – in terms of 'market and work' situations – that have occurred between 1921 and 1972 may well be as important as apparent changes in occupational structure.

Notes

1. Page references in brackets refer to the original article.
2. Particularly A. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, Hutchinson, London, 1973, and F. Parkin, 'Strategies of Social Closure in Class Formation' in Parkin (ed.), *The Social Analysis of Class Structure*, Tavistock, London, 1974. A full range of references is given in Goldthorpe and Llewellyn's article.
3. J. H. Goldthorpe and K. Hope, *The Social Grading of Occupations*, Oxford, 1974, pp. 134-43.
4. J. H. Goldthorpe, et al., *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, C.U.P., Cambridge, 1969, and R. Blauner, *Alienation and Freedom*, Chicago, 1964.
5. J. Greenbaum, 'Division of Labor in the Computer Field' in *Technology, the Labor Process and the Working Class*, ed. Rosalyn Baxendall et al., Monthly Review Press, New York, 1976.
6. H. Braverman, *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1974, chap. 15.
7. R. Crompton, 'Trade Unionism and the Insurance Clerk', *Sociology*, vol. 13, 1979, B. Stymne 'E.D.P. and Organizational Structure: a case study of an Insurance Company', *Swedish Journal of Economics*, Stockholm, 1966, pp. 89-116.
8. B. C. Roberts, R. Loveridge, J. Gennard, *Reluctant Militants*, Heinemann, London, 1972.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 302-3.