Figuring out social classes: an overview

Pierre Walthery

Official statistics are in fact a selection of data offering far less of use to the radical critic than to the reactionary (Miles and Irvine quoted in Levitas and Guy 1979:2)

Introduction

In this text, I will discuss the way the concept of social class is used as an explanatory/classificatory category in British official statistics. My main purpose will be to outline how, in a subtle way, public statistics (to be understood here as statistics made available for the large public), could be contributing to a slightly twisted portrayal of social reality in the UK in terms of the life chances of the individuals. Due to the potentially very large range of publications potentially concerned, this analysis will be based on the six last issue of the ONS flagship publication, Social Trends (ONS 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003; 2004a; 2005).

The concept of social class originates in the tax system of the Roman Empire with 'class' corresponding to tax bands (Dahrendorf 1959). For most of the 19th and 20th century, social classes have been at the core of heated debates among social scientists –only to mention them - reflecting the wider political debates and social struggles in Western industrialised societies, and elsewhere. However, for some reason, this topic has disappeared from the mainstream political/media agenda. This 'fall from grace' seems

indeed to be reflected in the way official statistics depict the British society, making it difficult to think of disparities in earnings, educational achievements in terms of class belonging, but also complicating the task of those among the greater public who might be concerned with social mobility and life chance opportunities. This happens at a time when research findings are showing continuous evidence of persistent inequalities between groups of the population defined by gender, socio economic background, and ethnicity.

I will follow two main lines of argument. The first one will reflect upon the academic debate over the occupational classification system used by the ONS at present[1]. As a result of it being the outcome of theoretical decisions, it is inevitably not neutral and bears some consequences, in terms of what it is able to show, especially for the most deprived portions of the population. The second one concerns the way this classification system is actually used, that is, the domains considered relevant for an 'explanation' in terms of social class, and conversely, the ones that are not, thus contributing to the perception of a 'meritocratic' Britain.

What are social classes and why do they matter?

A short definition of class

Among many others definitions, social classes have been identified as 'large groups among which unequal distribution of economic goods and/or preferential division of political prerogatives and/or discriminatory differentiation of cultural values result from economic exploitation or political oppression' (Outhwaite, Bottomore et al 1994). In this perspective, the distribution of

[1] An overview of this is provided in Levitas and Guy (1996).

positions within the social structure is seen as relational, rather than distributional (Goldthorpe and Llewellyn 1987). In other words, social classes are more than just aggregates of individuals sharing some characteristics: the lower position, for example, measured by the wealth of some, may have something to do with the position of the wealthier. This is the reason why some label this concept as explanatory (Nichols 1996).

The modern use of the term ‘social class’ as a tool for social analysis is inextricably linked to the 19th century, in particular in Britain and the subsequent development of the bourgeois capitalist vs. proletariat divide in the framework of the first industrial revolution. It is also apparent that a significant proportion of the contemporary debate in academic and politic circles about definition and measurement of social class can symmetrically be traced to two prominent 19th century thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber (Crompton, 1998).

According to Marx, social classes originate dynamically from the overarching economic structure of capitalist societies. A person’s place in the production process (in relation to the ownership of the means of production) determines their subsequent position in society, as institutions and the state are ‘superstructures’ determined by the economic exploitation process – i.e. the infrastructure. Thus, the bourgeoisie was defined by its exploitation of the working class through the appropriation of surplus value, which in turn granted it the ownership of the means of production. Class formation (i.e. the production of class) is seen as the consequence of the bourgeoisie attempts to retain economic power. By contrast, social mobility inhibits the process of class formation (Goldthorpe and Lllewellyn 1987).

Even during the 19th century, this dichotomic view was disputed by other researchers. Max Weber was among those who criticised the

sole use of economic exploitation and the dichotomy based on the property of means of production as the main criteria to define class (Aron 1991). His view was that the emergence of social classes could be considered as the by-product of multiple factors, such as status, market relationships, or skills, thus bringing in the idea that social classes are more about shared various individual characteristics rather than exploitation, and consequently, that classes can be multiple. This initial analysis and its subsequent followers have paved the way for the design of classifications based on shared occupational characteristics.

Although these views have had a powerful impact on subsequent analyses during most of the 20th century, Marx's and other Marxists' delineation of society in terms of classes has experienced substantial criticism. Among those are:

- The continuous decrease in importance of the number of traditional, working class industries and jobs, and the parallel rise of so called 'service economy';
- The development of the welfare state during the 20th century and the subsequent emergence of the middle class;
- The emergence of other analytical categories, such as gender and ethnicity as variables competing with class distortion for an individual's life chances, and the subsequent criticism that classes are either gender/ethnicity blind;

By contrast, recent empirical as well as theoretical research continue to bring about evidence of substantial inequalities in the life chances of a large number of individuals across the UK according to their social origins (Platt 2005). Not only has the share of income between the richest and the poorest increased, but more significantly, also employment or educational achievements

continue to be significantly determined by the social background of the individuals (Devine, Savage et al 2004).

However, the issue raised by the idea of social class seems at odds with the ideas promoted by most social democratic governments in Europe, including UK's New Labour, of meritocracy, and to a lesser extent, equal opportunities. These two concepts have been occupying the political agenda for some time. They imply that inequalities on 'unfair' grounds – such as gender, religion, disability or race (or any other factor viewed as external) cannot be tolerated. Meritocracy, on the other hand legitimizes the idea that 'merit' – i.e. effort – is or should be the main driving force behind anybody's achievement in life. Meritocracy allows for inequalities that are not deemed as in breach of equal opportunities to be seen as 'fair'. Initially invented by Michel Young in 1959, and intended as ironic, this term has been put forward by Tony Blair as a frontline political objective for Britain (Wheen 2001).

The underlying issue could be summarised as follows: are most individual's achievements in life the outcome of their capabilities[2], or rather, are they - at least partially - determined by their initial position in a broader socio-economic structure? If the latter is the case, how much room is to be dedicated in statistical reporting to this darker side of western affluent societies?

Classes in British official statistics: SC, SEG, NS-SEC

A preliminary remark to this section is that, if we are to follow classic definitions such as the one provided above, we will quickly conclude that social class (understood as groups characterised by their mutual exploitation/discrimination) are not measured in

[2] As Breen and Goldthorpe (2001) put it "IQ + merit"

British official statistics (Nichols 1996). Aggregates of individuals sharing occupational characteristics are measured instead, which is more in line with Max Weber's tradition of multiple socio economic groupings. On the other hand, as Crompton (1998) put it, assuming position in the occupational hierarchy and social class to be equal is a very common assumption in contemporary social sciences.

For most of the 20th century, two parallel classification systems have been used in the UK: the Social Class based on Occupation (SC), and the Socio-Economic Group (SEG). SC was initially introduced by the Registrar General in its 1913 General Report. Against the background of the debate between eugenicists and environmentalists about social stratification, it favoured a hierarchical view of occupations based upon occupational skills (Rose, Pevalin et al 2005). It comprised five main categories**,** ranging from 'professionals' to 'unskilled manuals'. These occupational groupings correlated with a wide range of inequalities in income, health and education.

However, SC has been heavily criticised, among others for what was seen as its lack of theoretical coherence as well as the hierarchy among classes it was relying upon, and was subsequently amended on several occasions. As Nicholls (1996) pointed out, in the 1951 edition of SC, the capitalist, business speculator, landowner, expert (undefined) and lunatic were grouped together.

From the 1951 census onwards a second classification, the Socio Economic Groups (SEG) was established. It was made of seventeen occupational groups, and was *aimed at bringing together people with jobs of similar social and economic status (Rose, Pevalin et 2005:9).* It was also closer to similar systems used in other countries for example by the INSEE in France, or the international

classification ISCO. It has been used until 2001 by most government departments, as well as various surveys, such as the General Household Survey or the BHPS.

In order to harmonize these two systems and following a review, the ONS adopted in 2001 the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) as their main tool for classifying the population according to occupational groups. As such, NS SEC is intended to be used in surveys, census, as well as for administrative registration purposes. Aimed at merging the two existing systems, it was also derived from earlier work by Goldthorpe. According to its authors, the purpose of this new system is 'to allow to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units in terms of their typical 'employment relations'. Here, labour market position equates to income, economic security and prospects of economic advancement. Work position refers primarily to location in systems of authority and control at work, although degree of autonomy at work is a secondary aspect'. (Rose, Pevalin et al 2005:14). The difference with the view of social class highlighted above is that these groups are thus gathering individuals sharing similar occupational features, rather than being grouped together according to more dynamic or relational features such their mutual 'degree of exploitation' or life chances. On the other hand, unsurprisingly, those categories are expected to correlate with various indicators of social inequalities.

The full version of NS-SEC comprises eight categories, whereas reduced ('folded') versions can include three or five categories. Similarly to SEG, NS-SEC can also account for traditional classifications on the labour market (employer, self-employed, employee). The employer category has been broken down so that it can account for differences between employer in large and smaller organisations. Another one of its features is that it can be broken down into occupations characterised by service relationships,

labour contracts (wage calculated in proportion to the amount of work/time accomplished), or intermediate occupations. In addition, it is attempting to account for occupations that blurred the boundary between traditional white collar and blue-collar jobs.

Following its publication, NS-SEC has received diverse comments, although on the whole it seemed to have been well received. Among the criticisms, it has been argued that, when correlated with expected outcomes (such as access to higher education) variance within classes could be greater than variance between classes (Blackburn 1998). Also, assuming that classes do exist as a relational category, an effect of increasing the size of a category is to decrease at the same time the relative disadvantages and advantages linked to it: if the range of service occupation is increasing, the distinction with the 'labour contract' class becomes less relevant (Prandy 1998).. From the perspective of these authors, percentiles would be more meaningful.

Another criticism could be that depending on the version of the system that is used, persons who have never worked could be classified in the same category as the long-term unemployed (even when using the one-year rule recommended by the authors). Although arguably this is coherent with the purpose of an occupations-based classification, if this tool is to be used as way of mapping social hierarchy, then serious problem might follow, since this category would encompass highly heterogeneous situations: most unpaid workers (i.e. women doing unpaid care work), with disabled persons as well as retired.. In the absence of additional measures for this category, it could be difficult to use it as a tool for understanding patterns of social exclusion.

Similarly, since this classification is based on occupations rather than employment status, typical labour market situations of less advantaged workers, such as the various types of temporary or

casual work might not properly be taken into account. This is also the case of part time work (Fisher 2003). Although acknowledging the issue, the authors argue that validation studies did not show evidence for further consideration of these additional categories. It remains that as it stands, NS-SEC does not provide a tool for a detailed analysis of more marginal forms of employment whose long term impact in terms of life chance is hardly negligible.

Another potential issue with NS-SEC is that it is recommended by its authors to be used for the measurement of households, which means that it is the Household References status Persons' (formerly known as head of household) that will be used for the classification. Although additional precautions have been taken in order to depart from a male bias in the allocation of this HRP status, the criteria still used (i.e. persons responsible for owning/renting, person with highest income), might prove not gender neutral given the repartition of economic power within the households and on the labour market. Therefore, it is still to be expected that more men than women will remain labelled as head of household. Obviously, this remark does not hold when the classification system is used at individual level.

Classless Britain?

As highlighted at the beginning of the previous section, social classes – understood as a category allowing to account for individuals at the upper and lower ends of the wealth scale - are covered only to a limited extent in the NS-SEC. On the other hand, it could be argued that occupation-based classes, even if lacking the desired precision to describe the economic situation of the 'underdogs' – as well the wealthiest, could provide a rough tool to approximate how variables measuring variously privileged positions on the social ladder can react when correlated with

indicators of outcome, such as earnings, educational achievement, class mobility, or health.

In order to examine this – in other words, the way occupational categories are *actually* used by the ONS in its mainstream publications - I have carried out a short review – using content analysis as a tool - of one of the ONS main publication, Social Trends. In the own words of its authors, Social Trend is described as ‘drawing together statistics from a wide range of government departments (…) to paint a broad picture of our society today, and how it has been changing” (ONS 2005). I aim to diagnose, how, when, and how frequently the occupational classification is used if not to explain various patterns of inequalities, at least to describe how different social categories are associated with other variables. My findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Number and types of mentions of occupational classifications in Social Trends

Issue	Total number of mentions**	Of which in the main body	Number of tables	Areas
30	18+12	7+5	3	Time spent in the same property, tenure, coverage by private health insurance, smoking, obesity, access to higher education
31	16+29	14+22	3	Population in working age, smoking status, type of accommodation, transport, leisure activities, qualification held, pupil GCSE achievement
32	61+24	49+18	4	Childhood injury, children diet, breastfeeding, population of working age, household expenditures*, life expectancy, smoking mother, obesity, type of accommodation*, attendance at sport/cultural events*, ownership of satellite dish, sport participation*
33	26+46	13+27	6	Smoking/drinking*, infant mortality, life expectancy, working age population, pupils' GCSE achievements*, tenure*
34	18+43	8+25	8	Young people participation in higher

Issue	Total number of mentions**	Of which in the main body	Number of tables	Areas
				education, health (obesity), income at a later age, access of ethnic minorities to managerial occupations, household expenditures
35	9+21	2+10	2	Access to higher education, household expenditures, reading, health (obesity, smoking)

Source: Social Trends nr 31-35; * NS-SEC is used omitting the category of unemployed/never worked. ** The first figure refers to explicit mention of the term 'social class', the second one to 'socio-economic classification'

We can draw a few conclusions from this:

1. Occupational classifications (using either the older SC/SEG system or the newer NS-SEC) are rather marginally referred to. The only issue of ST (n°32) providing more mentions of NS-SEC was the one whose thematic feature was dedicated to child poverty. The average number of mentions lies between an overall number of 40 and 50 mentions, with an average of about 30 when appendixes are accounted for. However, these figures do not adequately provide an indication of the concentration of the use. In actual terms, references to NS-SEC are concentrated on a limited number of pages. If we were to take into account only literal mentions to 'social class', figures would be much smaller.

2. Accordingly, the number of tables or graphs showing individual characteristics broken down by NS-SEC category is even smaller. The average number of tables is about 4 per issue of ST. It has to be kept in mind that ST is a publication of several hundred pages, with more than a hundred tables or graphs.
3. Interestingly also, the domains where occupational classes are actually mentioned are very limited, and only marginally different from one edition to another (yet again with the exception of ST n°32). Most are concerned with health-related behaviours such as smoking or leisure activities. On the other hand, to a lesser extent, at least one education-related variable is used in association with NS-SEC categories in five of the six editions of ST I have monitored. Apart from that, in most cases earnings, employment characteristics or access to social protection are not even mentioned as linked to occupational categories.
4. Moreover, several of the occurrences of NS-SEC I have reviewed omitted the 'unemployed/never worked category. This might have been for technical or 'small number' reasons, but this fact is disturbing, especially considering variables such as 'household expenditures (ST n°32), pupils' GSCE achievements, or type of tenure.

Although for obvious reasons, I could not carry out a systematic review of other publications by the ONS, I have also examined a few other reports, such 'Living in Britain' (ONS 2004b), as well as shorter summaries in statistics.gov.uk, all of which seemed to follow a similar pattern, with the exception of pensions in the former case. I have also been searching mainstream publications

by the ONS, as well as the statistics.gov.uk website for references to social mobility analysis. No mention seems to be made of this topic. In terms of assessing class mobility, only three studies have gathered comprehensive data on this topic in the last 50 years. Two surveys have been conducted, in 1954 (Social Mobility in Britain) at the LSE, and in 1973 at Oxford University and Scotland. While findings differ significantly and tend to show an improvement of life chances of member of the working class, at the same time, mobility, either measured in terms of rates of mobility or odds of mobility remain limited (Goldthorpe & Payne 1986). When examining the website of the ONS, only Social Trends n°30 bears mention of social mobility, in a rather optimistic way (ONS 1999).

Conclusion

Although the above overview provides only a superficial overview of the issue of social class and life chance measurement in British official statistics, I feel entitled to conclude that this topic seems to be significantly overlooked. Even though publications explicitly dealing with poverty and social exclusion are made available by the ONS, mainstream general reports only refer marginally to class inequalities in various crucial areas of life.

At another level, the existing tool for measuring occupational classes, although undoubtedly useful and robust by international standards, seems to be only partially satisfactory when taking on board the specific situation of less privileged groups. This reflects the fact that social inequalities are only partially reflected in the occupational order (Crompton 1998). An adequate tool for measuring social classes that would take into account the multi

dimensional aspect of this concept by measuring the combination of economical and cultural resources and inheritance together with social networks (Devine 2004) remains to be established.

Bibliography

Aron, R (1991), *Les Etapes de la pensee sociologique: Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville, Durkheim, Pareto, Weber.* Paris: Gallimard

Blackburn, R.M. (1998), "A new System of Classes: But What Are They and Do We Need Them?", *Work, Employment and Society*, Vol 12, No 4, pp. 1-7

Breene R, Goldthorpe JH (2001) "Class mobility and merit. The experience of two British birth cohorts", European Sociological Review, 17, 81-101

Crompton R. 1998. *Class and Stratification*. Cambridge: Polity Press

Dahrendorf, R. (1959) *Class and class conflict in industrial society,* Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press.

Devine F (2004) *Class Practices: How Parents Help Their Children Get Good Jobs,* Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Devine F, Savage M, Crompton R, Scott J(eds) (2004), *Rethinking Class, Identities, Cultures and Lifestyles*. Basingstoke, Palgrave

Fisher, K. (2003) 'An Initial Exploration of the Employment Conditions of Full-time and Part-time Workers Using the NSSEC' in D. Rose and D.J. Pevalin (eds.) *A Researcher's Guide to the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification*. London: Sage.

Goldthorpe, J.H. (with C. Llewellyn) (1987) *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Goldthorpe, J. H. & Payne, C. (1986) Trends In Intergenerational Class Mobility In England And Wales, 1972-1983. *Sociology-The Journal Of The British Sociological Association,* 20**,** 1.

Levitas, R. and W. Guy (1996) *Interpreting Official Statistics*, London: Routledge

Miles, I. And Irvine, J. (1979) 'The Critique of Official Statistics' in R. Levitas and W. Guy (eds.) *Interpreting Official Statistics*. London: Routledge: 66-89.

Nichols, T. (1979) 'Social Class: Official, Sociological and Marxist' in R. Levitas and W. Guy (eds.) *Interpreting Official Statistics*. London: Routledge: 66-89.

Office for National Statistics (1999) *Social Trends 30*. London, The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2001) *Social Trends 31*. London, The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2002) *Social Trends 32*. London, The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2003) *Social Trends 33*. London, The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2004a) *Social Trends 34*. London, The Stationery Office.

Office for National Statistics (2004b), *Living in Britain n°31: Results from the 2002, General Household Survey*. London. The Stationery Office

Office for National Statistics (2005) *Social Trends 35*. London, The Stationery Office.

Outhwaite, W., Bottomore, T., *et al* (Eds.) (1994). *The Blackwell dictionary of twentieth-century social thought*. Oxford, England & Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Reference.

Platt L. (2005) *Migration and social mobility: The life chances of Britain's minority ethnic communities*. London: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Prandy, K., (1998) "Deconstructing classes: critical comments on the revised social classification", *Work, Employment & Society* 12 pp. 743-753.

Rose, D. and O'Reilly, K. (1998) *The ESRC Review of Government Social Classifi cations: Final Report*. Swindon: ESRC/ONS.

Rose, D. and Pevalin, D. (with O'Reilly, K.) (2005) *The National Statistics Socio-economic Classifi cation: Origins, Development and Use*. London: ONS.

Wheen F (2001) "Satirical fiction is becoming Blair's reality" *The Guardian* Wednesday 14 February 2001

Pierre Walthery

Pierre.walthery@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk