

Is social class still important?

Steve Chapman



Prime Minister Gordon Brown is a fan of Saturday night television talent shows such as *The X Factor*, *Any Dream Will Do* and *I'd Do Anything*. But do the meritocratic principles that are supposed to underpin these shows also apply to British society?

It seems that television talent shows are not only fun, but they also symbolise Gordon Brown's current 'big idea' about 'unlocking talent'. This is the dominant theme of his government's approach to education and employment, and is his preferred solution to problems such as deprivation and poverty. Brown believes that the government should aim to release the abilities and talents of

those 'who would otherwise be left behind', in much the same way that these talent shows release the potential of their contestants.

The disappearance of social class?

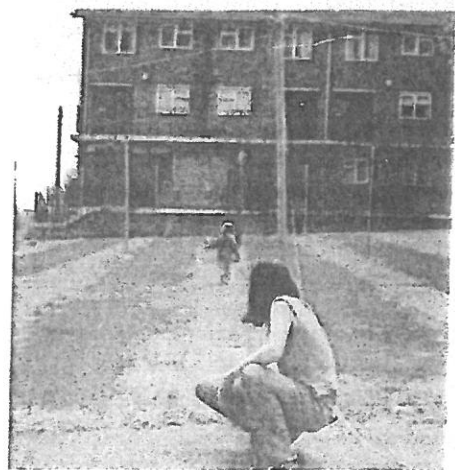
The prime minister justifies his focus on meritocracy with frequent references to the 'global skills race' and the fear that, com-

pared with India and China, the UK will be left behind in the competition to produce high-tech goods and services. He argued in the *Observer* on 10 February 2008 that the number of jobs in the global economy was about to double and that this heralded a 'worldwide opportunity revolution, bringing new chances of upward mobility for millions'. Brown claimed that this new global economy means there will be 'almost no limits to aspirations for upward mobility' for those in the UK whose talents have been unlocked.

Anthony Giddens is the sociologist who has most influenced the Labour government's ideas about equality of opportunity and unlocking talent. Giddens's book (written with Patrick Diamond), *The New Egalitarianism* (2005), argues that social class is no longer the main source of inequality in the UK in the twenty-first century.

In many ways, the conclusions of *The New Egalitarianism* are not surprising, considering that critical class analysis lost its way in the UK between 1980 and 2000 and consequently became marginalised in British academic circles. Gender, ethnicity, age and disability came to be seen as much more important sources of inequality. Furthermore, the rise in postmodernist thinking in the 1990s led to a decline in emphasis on structural inequality and a new focus on issues such as culture and identity.

The idea that identities and lifestyles are now characterised by diversity, choice, globalisation and consumption began to dominate sociological thinking — to the extent that some sociologists argued that social class was no longer a subject worthy of sociological analysis. Even sociologists still



Government policies aimed at social inclusion have focused on such things as getting single mothers into work and rescuing sink estates

Signposts

With many postmodern writers suggesting that factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, consumption patterns and culture are among the most important in making up our identity, Steve Chapman takes a timely look at social class. He presents a convincing argument that in modern Britain, class of origin still exerts a significant influence on life chances. He also explores the extent to which education overcomes initial inequalities to bring about a more meritocratic society. A number of figures illustrate his points, and it would be useful for you to continue to collect, and file in your folder, any data you come across that appear to support or refute his arguments. This article is important reading for all sociology students.

working within this field — particularly in educational research — were diverted away from inequality into studies of the middle-class use of social and cultural capital.

The New Egalitarianism

The New Egalitarianism typifies this academic sidelining of social class. In this book, Diamond and Giddens argue that the working class is no longer important because changes in the economy have led to a dramatic decline in the number of traditional manual workers. Consequently, the working class is now only one group among many that experience economic and social deprivation.

Diamond and Giddens argue that social and economic divisions are more likely to occur between groups such as dual-earner families and one-parent families, homeowners and council tenants, those in full-time work and those in casual temporary work, and the elderly and the young. They therefore reject the notion of class inequality and argue instead that 'social exclusion' is a more accurate term for 'the range of deprivations' (e.g. low wages, child poverty, lack of educational and training opportunities, and low levels of community belonging) that prevent a diverse range of groups from taking their 'full part in society'.

This view has had a profound effect on the Labour Party, which was traditionally the party of the working class. First, it allows politicians to deny that the socially excluded have much in common apart from their mutual experience of deprivation, because it suggests that the cause of that deprivation lies in several factors that are unrelated to the economic organisation of society.

Second, by implying that individual effort is the key to economic success, and by claiming the role of government is to unlock talent, little is done to change existing structural arrangements that typically benefit the economic elite. The cabinet minister, Ruth Kelly, noted in 2005 that 'social mobility is the key to a just society where success depends not on an individual's background but on their ability and efforts'. In other words, the structural organisation of UK society along social-class lines, with its corresponding inequalities in income, wealth and power, has little or no influence over social background, opportunities and life chances. It is up to individuals whether they succeed or fail.

Third, this approach shifts the blame for inequality and poverty firmly onto the shoulders of those on the bottom rungs of society. As Peter Wilby observed in the *New Statesman* on 6 September 2007:

Have you noticed how the working class has almost disappeared from political and media discourse?... Instead, everyone talks of welfare dependants, yobs and feral kids — a scrounging, amoral section of the population that is beyond the law and hopelessly mired in drugs, crime, family breakdown, bad parenting, guns and knives. The underlying message is that we are dealing with people beyond help, redemption, or even sympathy. They are outside society and, therefore, outside the class system. The best we can do is contain them.

The return of social class?

Criminologist Jock Young (2007) also notes that government policies aimed at social inclusion have focused on bringing truants back into school, getting single mothers into work, reducing dole queues, rescuing sink estates, controlling noisy neighbours and vandals, and imposing curfews on teenagers. In other words, at the heart of government policy is the acceptance that there exists what Young calls 'an underclass of weak and dysfunctional families immersed in a dependency culture generated by an over-generous welfare state'. If their potential could only be 'unlocked', this group would cease to be a problem.

Some academics — the so-called 'new traditionalists' — have recently challenged this social exclusionist view of social problems. They argue that equality of opportunity (i.e. the idea of roughly equal life chances) is generally undermined by the main cause of social problems in the UK

today: the economic and social inequalities brought about by the free-market capitalist economy. In other words, they believe that social class is still the central problem of the UK in the twenty-first century.

Young contends that we live today in a society that encourages and celebrates equality of opportunity, materialism, acquisition, wealth, celebrity status etc., but practises exclusion in every sphere of social life. We also brand those whom we encourage to compete on this extremely unlevel playing field as 'losers' and blame them for their lack of aspiration, talent and effort. They are dismissed as a feckless underclass. Criminologist Robert Reiner (2007) agrees with this assessment and notes that: 'Money has become the measure of men and women... ousting all other rankings of status.' Reiner argues that we should not be surprised that this value system has evolved into a culture of envy in which both violence and property crimes are seen simply as a means to a materialistic end.

Social historian David Kynaston (2008) has also argued that Gordon Brown's dream of equal opportunity is undermined by existing structural arrangements in which an upper-class or super-rich minority of people monopolise wealth and income, and ensure that avenues of mobility (such as education) are dominated by their children at the expense of other social groups.

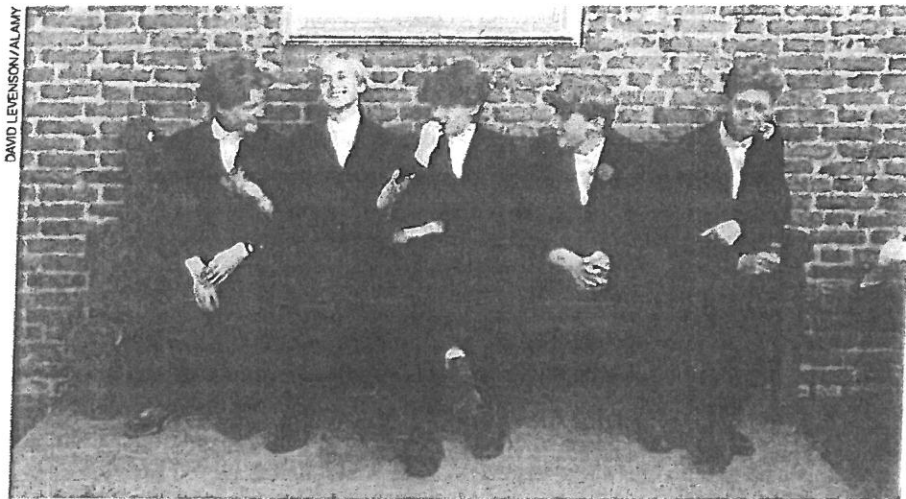
The growing wealth gap

If we examine the empirical evidence with regard to wealth and income, we can see strong support for the new traditionalist arguments that the meritocratic dream will

Box 1 The wealth gap

In 1986, 1% of the population owned 18% of the UK's marketable wealth (about £388 bn), according to the Inland Revenue. By 2003, 1% of the population owned 21% of the UK's wealth, and the wealthiest 50% had increased their share of the wealth from 90% of the total to 93% in the same period. Half the population shared only 10% of total wealth in 1986, but this had been reduced to 6% by 2003.

Things look even worse if property ownership is removed from this analysis and the focus is exclusively on wealth in the form of cash, stocks and shares, and other assets such as art and antiques. In 2003, the top 1% of the population owned 34% of all personal wealth, while the bottom 50% owned just 1%.



Students at Eton College: are private schools the 'cement in the wall that divides British society'?

never be achieved while so many prizes go to a narrow pool of winners. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported in 2004 that the distribution of wealth has altered little in the past 20 years, and if anything has become more concentrated among the super-rich (see Box 1).

The Institute for Fiscal Studies study of 2007 tax records (2008) concluded that income inequality between the rich and the poor is at its highest level since the late 1940s. The gap started to grow quickly between 1979 and 1997, when average incomes rose by 36%. However, this was not fairly distributed, as the top 10% of earners experienced a 62% rise while the poorest 10% of earners experienced a 17% decline.

Since 1997, when the Labour Party came into power, income inequality has widened even further.

■ In 2007, the top 0.1% (47,000 people) in the UK received 4.3% of all personal income — this was three times greater than their share in 1979.

■ The top 10% of individuals in the UK now receive 40% of all personal income (compared with 21% in 1979), while the poorest 10% receive only 3% (compared with 4% in 1979).

Much of the rise in income inequality is due to the extremely large salaries and bonuses paid to the super-rich. For example, Sir Stuart Rose, the chief executive of Marks and Spencer, was awarded a cash-and-shares deal worth £7.8m in 2007.

Orton et al. (2007) conducted a survey into public attitudes to wealth inequality and found deep social unease, especially about the pay of the highest earners. But evidence suggests that Gordon Brown's government

generally shares the view of cabinet minister Hazel Blears, who said in 2006 that 'an attack on wealth and income distribution is an attack on aspiration'. Compare this with David Cameron's assertion in 2008 that 'poverty is not acceptable — not when we have people who earn more in a lunchtime than millions earn in a lifetime'.

Education and inequality

David Kynaston argued in the *Guardian* on 22 February 2008 that most studies of meritocracy recognise education as being the prime engine of social mobility. He suggests that Brown's 'X-Factor' policies may not be as powerful as the 'P-factor', i.e. the existence of private schools. These schools generally reproduce the privileges of the economic elite and, according to ex-Labour leader Neil Kinnock, are the 'cement in the wall that divides British society'.

Empirical evidence supports Kinnock's view. For example, the Sutton Trust (2007) ranked the success of schools over a 5-year period at getting their students into Oxbridge universities. Westminster School (an expensive public school, with annual boarding fees of £25,956) came top, with 50% of its students entering Oxbridge. This means that the wealthy parents of Westminster students have a 50/50 chance of their child making it into Oxbridge. Altogether, there were 27 private schools in the top 30 schools with the best Oxbridge record, 43 in the top 50, and 78 in the top 100.

The Sutton Trust concluded that the 70th brightest sixth-former at Westminster or Eton is as likely to get a place at Oxbridge as the very brightest sixth-formers at a large comprehensive school. Other studies show

that those in high-status jobs, such as senior politicians, top business leaders and judges, are often Oxbridge-educated. Therefore, Oxbridge is almost certainly still the most influential pathway to the glittering prizes of top jobs and large salaries.

Kynaston concludes that these figures suggest that private education is a 'road-block on the route to meritocracy'. Roughly 7% of all children are educated at private schools, but these students take up 45% of Oxbridge places and a disproportionate number at other top UK universities. In other words, only the talents of the children of the wealthy elite are genuinely being unlocked. These inequalities are now so blatant that even Dr Anthony Seldon, headmaster of Wellington College (a public school), was moved to state in the *Observer* on 15 January 2008 that 'it is no longer tenable in 2008 to retain twentieth-century educational apartheid thinking'.

At the other end of the education system, evidence from the *Reducing Inequalities* report, written by Feinstein et al. for the National Children's Bureau in 2007, suggests that class inequalities are a significant influence on the under-achievement of working-class children. Feinstein notes that the children of skilled manual workers may not do as badly at school as the children of welfare dependants or unskilled workers, but they still underachieve and there are many more of them.

Children from these backgrounds have already fallen behind their more advantaged peers by the age of 3. This process continues throughout childhood, and it operates both ways: less able and initially low-achieving middle-class children generally improve their position, but the position of initially high-achieving working-class children generally declines. Consequently, more than half the children from skilled working-class homes (45% of the child population) who are in the top 25% in reading skills at the age of 7 fall out of this top quarter by age 11. By contrast, if a child from a professional home is in the top quarter at the age of 7, he or she is highly likely to be there 4 years later.

Hirsch (2007) argues that only 14% of the variation in working-class children's performance can be accounted for by school quality. Many working-class children fall behind because their families — however loving and well-intentioned — do not and often cannot provide the same support for formal learning as more affluent families because they lack the necessary material resources (Feinstein et al. 2007).

Social mobility — any dream will do?

Finally, mobility studies challenge Gordon Brown's belief that there are no limits to the possibilities for upward mobility. The *Reducing Inequalities* study of 2007 found that a child born to a labourer is six times more likely to suffer extreme poverty by the age of 30 than one born to a lawyer. Despite billions of pounds of government funding



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to cut child poverty, the gap between the poorest and richest children is probably wider today than it was three decades ago. Feinstein et al. note that the three most influential factors in predicting poverty at the age of 30 are parental occupation, low income and poor-quality housing — i.e. social class.

Goldthorpe and Jackson's study of mobility patterns (2007) suggests there is unlikely to be a return to the generally rising rates of upward mobility that characterised the middle decades of the twentieth century. They argue that the growth of the service sector has peaked and that opportunities for short-range upward mobility within the working class have been restricted by a sharp decline in the number of skilled manual jobs. They conclude that the growth in social mobility promised by Labour's emphasis on opportunity can only occur at the expense of middle-class downward mobility.

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here overwhelmingly suggests that Gordon Brown's aim to 'unlock talent' is little more than a pipe dream. There cannot be a level playing field unless fundamental inequalities in the distribution of wealth, income and educational opportunity are addressed. There is little sign of any political will to do this.

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Answer

ZERO TOLERANCE

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
16	20	15	9	3	14	21	1	13	10	5	26	4
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
17	7	24	8	22	19	12	18	2	25	11	6	23

puzzle



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