

The middle classes in modern Britain

The growth of the 'middle classes' runs counter to Marx's anticipation of class polarisation. Mike Savage looks at whether there is a distinct and separate 'middle class' in Britain today.

CONTEMPORARY discussions of social class still tend to be couched within the theoretical frameworks laid down by Karl Marx and Max Weber in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Scase 1992 and Edgell 1993 for recent examples). The world has, however, changed in significant ways since the days when they were writing. Perhaps most importantly, in the early twentieth century manual workers (in manufacturing and agriculture) formed the overwhelming majority of the working population, and it was therefore the character of the working class which held the attention of sociologists and social commentators. Even down to the 1980s, much sociological debate on social class has focused upon whether the working class has changed — think of the discussion of the 'Affluent Worker' studies in the 1960s (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1969); arguments about the way that consumption-sector cleavages were possibly dividing the working class (Saunders 1990) and, more recently, interest in whether the working class is being divided into an underclass and a more prosperous group of workers (e.g. Morris 1994).

However, as we approach the twenty-first century, the relevance of this focus is in serious doubt. Since 1945, and especially in the past two decades, the number of people employed in 'middle class' jobs has increased rapidly, so that any attempt to understand the social relations of modern Britain really cannot avoid seriously examining the position and activities of the middle classes. It comes as something of a shock to realise that there are now more university lecturers than coal miners! In 1991 29.4% of those in the workforce worked in professions and management, a figure only marginally smaller than the 32.7% who worked as manual workers. If one were to include the self-employed

(10.7%) and the routine white-collar workers (27.2%) as part of the middle class, we would have to conclude that the middle classes now comprise a substantial majority of the employed population.

Thinking about the middle classes is therefore of fundamental importance for understanding contemporary social change, and in recent years a lively debate has taken place on the significance of current trends for the way sociologists talk about social class. Indeed, there is some suggestion that recent debates about the middle classes have given a new lease of life to rather tired old debates about

class (see notably the papers in Butler and Savage 1995). In this article I shall point to some of the main issues and findings from recent research.

MIDDLE-CLASS BOUNDARIES

Studies of the middle classes have always been bedeviled by the 'boundary problem' (Abercrombie and Urry 1983), the problem of deciding which types of people can helpfully be seen as part of the middle class. In recent years a considerable amount of agreement has been reached on this tricky issue, however. Traditionally, the most common way of differentiating the working classes from the middle classes was to claim that the working class were manual workers, whilst the middle classes were non-manual workers. This difference is occasionally referred to as the 'collar line', the distinction between blue-collar (manual) and white-collar (non-manual) workers. Today, this stress on the collar line has largely been discredited. It is generally agreed that many routine white-collar workers (especially women) now have rather similar conditions of work and remuneration to blue-collar workers, and cannot helpfully be seen as being in a higher class.

The rise in employment in the service sector confuses the division between manual and non-manual workers anyway, and it is possible to argue that many of the most extreme forms of 'proletarianisation' — in the sense of poor wages, irregular employment, and bad working conditions — are found amongst service workers. By the 1980s only 8% of British unskilled workers were employed in industry! Furthermore, it can be argued that many forms of supposedly 'working class' activity, such as trade union membership and industrial action are now as strong, possibly stronger, amongst white-

collar workers as they are amongst manual workers. In short, the idea of a 'collar line' being used to differentiate the middle from the working class has now been largely discredited.

The self-employed also pose interesting puzzles for thinking about the middle classes. Both Marx and Weber recognised the existence of the '*petit bourgeoisie*' as a distinct middle class fraction, lying between workers on the one hand and large property owners on the other. Marx assumed that self-employed farmers, small business owners, small shopkeepers and so forth would increasingly be 'squeezed out' by the rise of large business. And indeed, for much of the twentieth century Marx's view seemed to be borne out, as the number of people working on their own account fell gradually, but steadily. However, there has been a remarkable turn-around in the past twenty years. Between 1971 and 1981 the numbers of self-employed bottomed out, at around 6.7% of those in the labour market; whilst in the years between 1981 and 1991 the numbers rose by a staggering 45%, to comprise over 10% of the workforce. The difficulty resides, however, in knowing what to make of this rise in numbers. Does it indicate a flourishing petty economy, and the expansion of opportunities for entrepreneurs? Or is there a bleaker portrait to be painted? Perhaps as workers have lost their jobs they have had to turn to self-employment as a last resort (possibly encouraged by Conservative government support of small business in the 1980s), with the result that this shift to self-employment masks the growth of marginal, insecure employment which can hardly be seen as middle class in any meaningful sense.

One way of considering which of these perspectives is correct is to see whether the self-employed tend to be a stable or unstable group. Do they continue in self-employment over a period of years, or do they tend to slip into more marginal forms of employment (or unemployment)? Recent research by Fielding (1995) examines what the self-employed in 1981 were doing ten years later in 1991 — and therefore allows us to consider whether self-employment was a temporary phase in a person's working life (see Table 1). Fielding shows that — rather against expectations — the majority of the self-employed in 1981 (67.2%, though a smaller proportion of women than men) who were still in the labour market in 1991 were still in self-employment. They therefore appear, on the whole, to comprise a relatively stable and secure part of the workforce. In fact this is a much higher figure than was found for the period 1971–81, where less than half the self-employed lasted the ten-

A) MALES Social class in 1981	Social class in 1991						
	PRO	MAN	PB	PWC	PBC	UE	TLM
Professionals	63.45	18.63	4.01	4.04	6.56	3.31	100.00
Managers	13.91	54.16	11.58	7.41	8.12	4.82	100.00
Petit bourgeoisie	3.58	6.70	70.67	2.27	11.15	5.63	100.00
White collar	12.09	23.67	7.96	38.12	12.39	5.76	100.00
Blue collar	4.39	6.17	11.23	3.73	65.23	9.26	100.00
Unemployed	5.52	5.52	14.43	5.16	35.91	33.72	100.00
Education	13.90	8.30	6.08	16.50	35.90	19.32	100.00
Other	12.13	10.99	11.11	14.34	33.33	18.10	100.00

B) FEMALES Social class in 1981	Social class in 1991						
	PRO	MAN	PB	PWC	PBC	UE	TLM
Professionals	77.40	5.99	2.48	6.39	3.80	1.93	100.00
Managers	16.52	36.83	8.41	28.50	6.10	3.64	100.00
Petit bourgeoisie	7.03	7.51	48.41	24.38	10.33	2.34	100.00
White collar	7.24	9.65	4.32	62.30	12.54	3.95	100.00
Blue collar	4.55	3.18	3.35	22.66	60.00	6.26	100.00
Unemployed	11.78	5.68	4.70	35.78	24.98	17.07	100.00
Education	18.06	8.10	1.80	47.28	13.55	13.21	100.00
Other	11.39	5.31	7.21	44.81	25.60	5.69	100.00

Source: OPCS Longitudinal Study 1981 (Crown Copyright Reserved)

Table 1 Social class transitions for men and women in England and Wales 1981–91.

year course (Savage *et al.* 1992). Around 12% of the self-employed had become unemployed by 1991, and a further 10% were working as manual workers. Putting these figures together suggests that, in general, the *petit bourgeoisie* are becoming a more secure, distinct and visible group in British society. This marks a very significant shift which reverses a long-term trend.

There is a further point to make here. In the past self-employment tended not to carry high status, and (with the exception of 'independent' professionals in legal or architectural practice and so on) most professional and managerial employees preferred to achieve rewards and standing by working for a large organisation. This seems to have changed, however. Considerable numbers of managers now seem to prefer to work for small firms or for themselves; and the proportion of managers moving into self-employment rose considerably in the 1980s. Many areas of expanding self-employment were in 'glamorous' areas, such as consultancy work in financial services, or in 'hi-tech' industry. Some writers argue that many firms now prefer to contract services to outside consultants and agents rather than to carry them out in-house, with the result that the self-employed gain a further boost. Furthermore, it has become easier to have a 'business on the side', whilst continuing to be an employee (one survey reported in Savage *et al.* (1992) suggests that as many as one-third of managers in one firm had a side-business). In short, a group which had been regarded as recently as the 1970s as part of the 'traditional' *petit bourgeoisie*, a legacy of the past,

seems to have found a new lease of life.

What does this mean for thinking about the size of the middle class? It seems sensible to see manual workers, the unemployed, and most routine white-collar workers as occupying largely working-class positions, which means that the majority of the population can still usefully be seen as working class (which comprises around 60% of the workforce). Nonetheless the middle classes employed in the professions, administration, management — and the self-employed — do now constitute a very sizeable proportion of the workforce. Let us now consider their sociological significance.

THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT THE MIDDLE CLASSES

Major issues of interpretation are posed by the changing positions of the professions and management — a group which accounts for nearly one-third of the workforce. The rise of people employed in these groups is striking. In 1971 10.2% of those in the labour market were employed in the professions; by 1991 this figure had risen to 15.2%. Comparable figures for managers indicate a rise from 7% to 11.3% over the same twenty-year period. What do these trends indicate for the shape of British society? Here a number of different theories have recently been advanced.

Perhaps the best-known account is the 'service-class' thesis, developed especially by John Goldthorpe (1982) and in a rather different way by Abercrombie and Urry (1983). Goldthorpe argued that professional, managerial and administrative workers form

a distinctive social class, which separates them from all other social groups. He calls this class the 'service class', (or occasionally, and perhaps more helpfully, the 'salariat'). This term 'service class' can be confusing. It makes us think of workers in the 'service sector', such as catering. However, Goldthorpe uses a different definition which refers instead to workers who provide specialist 'services' (hence the title) to their employer. These services either involve providing specialist knowledge (in the case of professionals), or delegated authority (in the case of managers). In return for these specialist services these workers are granted special privileges, such as a high salary, job security, fringe benefits, and 'prospective rewards' — the potential for career development. Professionals and managers are relatively secure and privileged; and for this reason Goldthorpe argues that the service class will become a major conservative force in society as it seeks to defend and consolidate its own advantages. In short, the expansion of the 'service class' has helped bring about a new social group who can be expected to play a conservative role as bulwarks of the *status quo*, and the presence of this class will tend to damp down pressures for any fundamental social change.

In direct opposition to Goldthorpe's views is the work of some — mainly American — sociologists (notably Alvin Gouldner), who talk about the rise of a new class (occasionally called a 'professional-managerial class', or PMC) which stands outside traditional class divisions and is therefore able to sustain forms of social dissent and new ways of living. Gouldner (1979) argues that this 'new class', is able to generate a 'culture of critical discourse'. Other writers suggest that these new groups are bearers of 'post-materialist' values. Since they have 'solved' the problem of affluence, and no longer have to worry about such basic issues as feeding, clothing and housing themselves, their attention switches to other, more 'expressive', issues — such as ecology, personal wellbeing, better ways of living and relating — and so on. In short, the development of these professional and managerial groups is seen by Gouldner as a 'progressive' development, which augurs well for the future.

A third position is developed by Wright (1985), and Bourdieu (1984) and has been adopted by Savage *et al.* (1992) in their account of the middle classes in contemporary Britain. These writers argue that it is not helpful to talk about professionals and managers as a distinct class of their own, because there are in fact major divisions within their ranks. Perhaps the best known example of this view is Bourdieu's emphasis upon the differences between economic and cultural capital. Bourdieu stresses that some

groups within the middle classes succeed by emphasising their cultural distinction and taste which, amongst other things, allows them to succeed in the education system and therefore gain qualifications to move into professional jobs. Other members of the middle classes (for instance, managers who work their way up from the shop floor), however, do not do well at school and succeed for other reasons.

Bourdieu emphasises the conflicts between the 'cultured' and the 'moneyed' groups which this can lead to. Savage *et al.* (1992) draw upon this framework to argue that in Britain there are major long-standing divisions between managers and professionals which, if anything, are becoming rather more distinct. Managers are becoming rather marginalised; whilst professionals have been able to defend their existing privileges and find new areas to deploy their expertise, by selling their services on the market. Savage *et al.* (1992) suggest growing tensions and conflicts within the middle classes as they struggle to improve their position.

Before evaluating these different views, it is noteworthy that none of them draws directly on the 'classical' class theory of either Marx or Weber. The pedigrees for each of these theories is hybrid. This does suggest that as the middle classes increase in size, so the sociological debates themselves shift. Let us now consider which of these theories offers the best way of understanding the contemporary middle classes.

HOW ARE THE MIDDLE CLASSES CHANGING?

There is now a substantial body of research devoted to exploring various facets of middle-class life. Here I only have scope to deal with a few of the salient issues.

Traditionally both professionals and managers tend to have enjoyed predictable, secure careers in large bureaucracies. The idea of the organisational career refers to the way that these middle class employees could expect to work their way up a job ladder within a large firm or within a public organisation. Such employees often strongly identified with their employer, who in turn 'cocooned' their salaried workers with generous pension and fringe-benefit systems. However, the idea of predictable job movement in the course of one's career has radically changed in recent years. Professionals and managers alike are increasingly paid on the basis of their performance, and payment is also increasingly arranged on an individual basis and is subject to renegotiation.

A good example of these changes is in banking. Until the later 1980s bank managers were paid a salary which reflected their

seniority in the bank and the size and importance of the branch or unit they were employed in. Salaries (for junior managers) were negotiated between unions and management, and contained an incremental component, which meant that they automatically rose each year. In the later 1980s the banks began to change this system. Managers' salaries were determined in part by whether they were able to achieve targets (for instance, a certain level of sales) which were set annually. Automatic increments, paid regardless of performance, were largely abandoned. A considerable number of managers, especially those over the age of 50, also lost their jobs during the recession of the early 1990s. Cases such as this are not unusual. Throughout much of the public sector, similar innovations — which question the security and privileges of senior staff — were introduced. Some local authorities, for instance, employed their chief executives on five-year renewable contracts.

These developments suggest that Goldthorpe's view of the 'service class' as characterised by 'prospective rewards', which stands above the rough-and-tumble of the labour market, is today misplaced. One might also suggest that an emphasis upon the way these groups have 'solved' their economic problems is also misleading. In fact, increasing levels of labour market insecurity may well have accentuated the struggle of middle-class employees to look after their own position!

This increasing instability means that professionals and managers now have more mobile and uncertain careers than hitherto. The significance of increasing levels of job mobility have been much debated in recent work. Goldthorpe (1982) has argued that job movement between professional and managerial positions indicates that the two types of worker are part of a common class. Savage *et al.* (1992) by contrast, emphasise that it is unlikely for professionals to become managers and *vice versa*, and that job insecurity has very different implications for the two groups.

Considerable evidence has now accumulated which suggests that the careers of managers have changed markedly. During the 1980s and 1990s many firms have cut management jobs (see Scase and Goffee 1989). Organisations have increasingly recruited managers from outside, rather than promote their own staff. Surveys of managers in private industry suggest that until the 1970s around 40% of managers had only ever worked for one firm. By the 1980s only between 10-20% of managers had worked for one firm. Fielding (1995) has shown that no less than 24% of managers in 1981 actually moved down the social ladder by 1991, indicating increasing proportions of instabil-

ity. The comparable figures for professionals were much lower, at 14%. It has also shown that a significant number of managers have been able to move into professional employment (see Table 1). Table 1 also shows that substantial numbers of managers were downwardly mobile between 1981 and 1991. Over 20% of male managers in 1981 had moved to routine white-collar work, manual employment or unemployment by 1991. For women managers, the figure is an astonishing 38.2%. In short, it would appear that, although the managerial wing of the middle classes may have grown in size, it has become a rather insecure group. The professional middle class, by contrast, is rather more stable, with markedly lower rates of downward mobility for both men and (especially) women.

There is also evidence that professional and managerial groups have rather different cultural outlooks and political viewpoints, though much further research remains to be done here. One interesting example of fragmentation concerns the residential preferences of the middle classes. For much of the twentieth century the middle classes were an archetypically suburban class, and many aspects of middle-class identity were forged out of common residential patterns. From the 1960s social scientists began to detect that growing numbers of the middle classes were attracted to what has been called the 'rural idyll', as many professionals and managers have moved into the countryside. Indeed, one recent research project suggests that as many as two-thirds of migrants to selected rural areas are from the middle class. However, by contrast, there is also a contrary movement, whereby some parts of the middle classes have moved back to the cities — a process known as 'gentrification'. During the 1980s it became fashionable for members of the affluent middle classes to move to central urban locations in London (such as Islington) and other large cities. Middle-class lifestyles appear therefore to have fragmented.

Finally, let us consider the case of politics. Goldthorpe argues that the service class is increasingly conservative, whilst the 'new class' theorists point to its radical potential. Research on political alignments suggest that the political alignments of the 'salariat' have actually changed little, despite the major political upheavals of recent years. Around 50-55% appear to identify with the Conservative party and around 22% with the Labour party. There are also significant differences within the 'service class' (see Table 2). Public-sector workers tend to be more left-wing than private-sector workers. Welfare and creative workers, such as journalists, teachers, artists and so on are distinctive in

	Conservative	Alliance	Labour	Other		
Public sector	40	32	26	2	100%	(212)
Private sector	57	29	13	2	101%	(281)
Specialists	44	31	24	2	101%	(266)
Technocrats	56	29	14	2	101%	(287)
Welfare and creative	32	33	34	1	100%	(162)
Business and administrative	58	28	12	2	100%	(391)
Economically inactive	63	26	9	1	98%	(299)

Source: 1987 cross-section survey

Table 2 Occupational divisions within the salariat 1987.

being relatively left wing — Table 2 shows that in 1987 these groups were more likely to vote Labour than Conservative. The highly educated appear to be more left-wing than the less highly educated, a fact which appears to endorse the 'new class' idea, at least for some fractions of the middle classes.

CONCLUSIONS

Let us return to the theoretical accounts of the middle classes. Goldthorpe's arguments about the 'service class' do appear to ignore the multiple axes of division within the middle classes, which I have briefly highlighted here. On the other hand, 'new class' ideas do not take account of the fact that only a small proportion of the middle class — the highly educated, people working in the arts and higher education etc. — appear to exhibit much 'culture of critical discourse'. So it would appear that an emphasis upon fragmentation is the most useful, though we need to know more about the sources of such division.

Further, it is important to recognise the way that different types of class position are linked by mobility chains. The fact that around 60% of the workforce are in working-class positions and 40% in middle-class ones should not blind us to the fact that many people move between such positions. Look at Table 1 again. Of all the routine male white-collar workers in 1981, over a third had moved into management or the professions by 1991 — though the figures for women are noticeably lower. There is also evidence that people from the middle classes are downwardly mobile. The processes facilitating and constraining mobility are therefore of fundamental importance for thinking about the meaning of class today. And, it might be added, given that gender, race and ethnicity appear to be important forces affecting mobility, it may be suggested that class cannot be seen as standing totally apart from these other social forces.

One final point is this. It should not be thought that the rising number of people in 'middle class' jobs means that class itself is less important. What we have seen is the erosion of the 'collar line' as a meaningful axis of social division. However, it would appear that the expansion of professional and

managerial employees has led to new types of conflict and division. As traditional 'middle-class' privileges are called into question, and middle-class employees need to compete more intensively in the labour market, they are forced to engage in 'positional' conflicts to market themselves and their skills. The important conclusion is to suggest that even if it is true that the middle classes are forming a larger proportion of the workforce, this does not mean that we live in a more stable or harmonious society.

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