

INTRODUCTION

Social inequality refers to any differences that result in some people having more socially valued characteristics than others. Degrees of power, prestige and wealth may be significant.

Social stratification refers to a situation in which people are divided into distinct groups ranked at different levels. The Hindu caste system is an example – different castes have different levels of status depending on their supposed degree of religious purity.

Those at different levels in a stratification system may develop a common **subculture** or way of life.

Social mobility refers to movement between strata.

Status in stratification systems can be ascribed (given at birth, e.g. the caste system) or achieved (resulting from what you do, e.g. class systems).

Life chances are your chances of getting socially desirable things (e.g. money, education, longevity), and are affected by your place in the stratification system.

Stratification systems have sometimes been based on what were thought to be natural inequalities or **biological differences** (e.g. apartheid in South Africa assumed that whites were superior to blacks). However, sociologists see such views as rationalizations to legitimate the position of powerful groups.

A FUNCTIONALIST PERSPECTIVE

Parsons – stratification and values

Parsons (1964) sees all societies as having a value consensus – a general agreement about what is desirable and valuable (or undesirable). Whatever these values, individuals will be ranked in accordance with them.

Stratification is **inevitable** as all societies have some values and will make judgements.

In complex industrial societies, planning and organization require some individuals to have more **authority** than others.

Stratification unites people because it derives from shared values.

Criticisms

Critics argue that many values are not shared and that stratification can be highly divisive.

Davis and Moore – role allocation and performance

Davis and Moore (1967, first published 1945) argue that all societies share certain functional prerequisites. One of these is **role allocation** – ensuring that roles are filled and performed effectively and conscientiously by properly trained people.

Some jobs are more **functionally important** and some people have more **ability** than others.

To match the most able to the most important jobs, and to ensure that tedious, unpleasant or dangerous jobs are filled, a rewards system is needed.

The better-rewarded will form a higher stratum. This process is **inevitable, universal** (found in all societies) and **beneficial** because it helps society to function better.

Criticisms

Melvin Tumin (1953) argues that:

- 1 Many low-paid and even unskilled jobs are just as vital as higher-paid or more skilled jobs.
- 2 There is a greater pool of talent than Davis and Moore assume.
- 3 Training is a pleasant experience and does not require extra rewards to persuade people to undertake it.
- 4 Stratification systems can demotivate those at the bottom.
- 5 Stratification systems do not provide equality of opportunity and tend to prevent those from lower strata achieving their potential.
- 6 Stratification systems encourage 'hostility, suspicion and distrust'.

A MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

According to Marx:

- All stratified societies have two major classes: a ruling class and a **subject class**.
- The ruling class owns the **means of production** (land, capital, machinery, etc.), and the subject class does not.
- The ruling class **exploits** the subject class.
- The ruling class uses the **superstructure** (e.g. legal and political systems) to legitimate (justify) its position and prevent protests by the subject class.
- In capitalist societies the main classes are the **bourgeoisie** (the capitalist class that owns the main means of production – capital) and the **proletariat** (the working class that has to sell their labour to survive).
- The bourgeoisie exploits the working class through the system of **wage labour**. Capitalists pay wages to workers, but make a profit (**surplus value**) because they pay workers less than the value of what they produce.
- **Capitalism** is the newest type of class society but it will also be the last. Eventually it will be replaced by a **communist society** in which the means of production (land, capital, factories, machinery, etc.) will be communally owned.

The **transition to communism** will not be straightforward because it requires **revolutionary action** by the proletariat. However, the bourgeoisie uses the superstructure (e.g. the media, education system, and political and legal systems) to suppress the proletariat by creating **false class consciousness** (which means

that workers do not realize that they are being exploited). Eventually, though, **class consciousness** will develop – workers will realize that they are being exploited and will rise up to change society.

Class consciousness will develop because:

- There is a basic **contradiction** in capitalist societies between the interests of workers and capitalists.
- Workers will become concentrated in large factories, making it easier to communicate with one another and organize resistance.
- Workers' wages will decline in relation to the growing wealth of capitalists, in order to maintain profits. There will be a **polarization** of classes, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer, making inequalities more obvious.
- **Skill divisions** between workers will be reduced as new technology is introduced, resulting in a more homogeneous and united working class.
- The **petty bourgeoisie** (small capitalists such as shopkeepers) will be unable to compete and will sink into the proletariat.
- Capitalist economies are unstable, and **economic crises** and periods of high unemployment will cause growing resentment.
- Workers will join together to form unions, political parties and revolutionary movements as class consciousness grows, enabling them to overthrow capitalism and replace it with communism.

Criticisms

Many other theories and much of the research we will look at offer evaluation of the Marxist perspective.

A WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE

Max Weber (1864–1920) accepted some of Marx's ideas but rejected others.

Weber argued that classes develop from people's **market situation** (their situation in relation to buying and selling things, including their labour power) in market economies.

Weber differs from Marx in a number of ways:

- Like Marx he saw a basic division between those who have considerable **property** (and can live off the proceeds) and those who do not – the **propertyless** – who have to sell their labour. However, there are also significant differences within the two groups as well as between them.
- Within the propertyless group there are some who can sell their labour for a higher price (those with scarce but sought-after skills such as professionals and managers). They have an advantaged market situation compared to other groups of workers. Unlike Marx, Weber therefore believed that different **occupational groupings** could form classes.
- Weber saw no evidence of a polarization of classes. Instead he thought that the middle class of **white-collar workers** in bureaucracies would expand.

- Weber did not believe that a revolution by the proletariat was likely.
- He thought that some, but not all, power came from wealth.
- He argued that class was not the only basis for group formation. Status groups (groups of people who enjoyed similar levels of status or respect in society) could also be formed. **Status groups** might be based on ethnicity, age, nationality, gender, etc., and tended to share similar lifestyles. Class and status could be closely linked (for example, ethnic minorities might be excluded from highly-paid jobs in a society), but this was not always the case. Status groups often cut across class divisions (e.g. members of the gay community).
- Organized groups which seek to exercise political power or influence those with power are called **parties** by Weber. **Parties** may be political parties (e.g. the Labour and Conservative parties) or they may be pressure groups. They may be based on class (e.g. the 'old' Labour Party), status groups (e.g. Gay Rights organizations) or neither (e.g. Greenpeace).

CHANGES IN THE BRITISH STRATIFICATION SYSTEM

Changes in the occupational structure

- During the twentieth century the proportion of manual workers and personal service workers fell steadily from over three-quarters of all employees to well under a half, while the proportion of **non-manual workers** rose from under a quarter to over a half.
- **Manufacturing industry** declined, particularly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, while service industries grew.
- **Private sector service jobs** have increased rapidly over recent years.
- **Women**, especially married women, now form a bigger proportion of the workforce, but women are more likely to work part-time and are concentrated in intermediate and junior non-manual jobs.

The changing distribution of income

Income has an important effect on **life chances**. Official statistics measure income in a variety of ways:

- **Original income** refers to all income apart from state benefits.
- **Gross income** includes state benefits.
- **Disposable income** deducts tax and national insurance.
- **Final income** includes the value of benefits such as healthcare, which are not given in cash.

Government figures show that the poorest 20% of the population receives less than half the average final income, while the richest 20% receives nearly twice the average. However, taxes and benefits do equalize and redistribute income to some extent.

The Royal Commission on the Distribution of Income found that there was some **redistribution of income**

away from the richest groups between 1949 and 1979, but middle-income groups benefited most. From 1979 to 1997 changes in taxation and benefits under Conservative governments generally benefited the well-off at the expense of the poor. Since 1997, government policies have tended to favour those in low-paid work.

Overall, income inequalities declined in the twentieth century but not enough to eradicate class differences.

The changing distribution of wealth

- There are no direct measures of the distribution of wealth, but surveys and data on the value of the estates of those who have died give some indication of wealth distribution.
- Wealth can be defined in different ways: **marketable** wealth includes only things that can be sold; **non-marketable** wealth includes the value of pensions, etc.
- Available figures suggest that wealth inequalities narrowed from 1900 to the early 1990s, widened throughout the 1990s.
- Wealth remains quite highly concentrated: in 1999 the richest 1% of the population owned 23% of all marketable wealth, and the richest 10% owned 54%.
- The proportion of people in Britain owning shares has increased in recent years, but shares make up a declining proportion of personal wealth (15% in 1995), and most people only have small shareholdings.

THE UPPER CLASS

Westergaard and Resler – a Marxist view

In 1975 Westergaard and Resler (1976) put forward a Marxist view that there was a ruling class in Britain consisting of the richest 5–10% of the population, whose position came from the ownership of capital. Private share ownership was highly concentrated in this minority group.

The ruling class was made up of company directors, top managers, higher professionals and senior civil servants, many of whom were big shareholders.

Saunders – a New Right view

Peter Saunders (1990) puts forward a New Right view of the upper class. He agrees with much of what Westergaard and Resler say about the concentration of wealth, but he sees this group as an **influential economic elite** rather than a ruling class.

Most big companies are run by managers with only small shareholdings in the company. Much wealth is not privately held but is in pension schemes, insurance policies, etc., meaning that most people have a stake in capitalism.

Saunders claims that the economic elite do not have most of the power – power is decentralized. Class divisions have weakened and a ruling class no longer exists.

Scott – Who Rules Britain?

John Scott (1982, 1991, 1997) is influenced by **Marxism, elite theory and Weber**.

Scott sees Britain as retaining an **upper/ruling class** but it is much changed since the nineteenth century.

- The upper class evolved from nineteenth-century interlocking networks of landowners, financiers and manufacturers.
- During the twentieth century, family-controlled companies became less common (though important ones remain) and **joint stock companies** developed. Furthermore, professional managers took a greater role in running companies.
- A capitalist class persists. The ownership of property for use (e.g. housing) has become more widespread, but the ownership of property for power (e.g. stocks and shares, privately owned businesses, etc.) remains highly concentrated.
- The decisions of big companies and big financial institutions are controlled by a network of managers and directors who often have directorships in many companies (**interlocking directorships**). This capitalist class comprises around 0.1% of the adult population.
- The policies of all governments (even Labour ones) are strongly influenced by the interests of the capitalist class, and governments cannot go against the interests of capitalists without risking grave economic problems.

Sklair – the global system and the transnational capitalist class

Leslie Sklair (1995) argues that globalization and the global system have produced a **transnational capitalist class** associated with major transnational corporations. Members of this class are not loyal to particular countries; they see their interests in terms of the capitalist system as a whole.

Criticisms

Sklair underestimates the importance of finance capitalists and the continuing power of nation-states, but he may be right to add a transnational dimension to ruling-class theory.

Elite theory and pluralism provide alternative views (see chapter 9, pp. 123–4).

THE MIDDLE CLASSES

Marx's ideas on the middle class have influenced later research.

Marx argued that classes would be increasingly polarized between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The small business people/self-employed (the petty bourgeoisie) would sink into the proletariat.

Marx recognized the growing number of white-collar workers but said little about their significance. Many critics of Marx argue that there is a growing middle

class, which undermines his theory of two polarizing classes.

Weber, however, believed that there was a middle class, with superior **life chances** to the working class and a more advantaged **market situation** (they had skills and qualifications which were in demand, which allowed them to command higher wages than the working class).

The conventional way to distinguish between the middle class and the working class is to equate them with **non-manual and manual workers**. However, the idea that non-manual workers make up the middle class can be criticized:

- 1 Unlike Marxist and Weberian theories, it has little theoretical basis.
- 2 Non-manual workers are a diverse group which may overlap with other classes.

THE UPPER MIDDLE CLASS

Until the 1980s the **petty bourgeoisie** of self-employed and small employers declined in line with Marx's theory. However, from the 1980s it increased.

The professions

- The professions grew from around 4% of those employed in 1900 to 13% of men and 11% of women by 1996.
- Professionals are employed both in growing private businesses and in the welfare state.
- They can be divided into **lower professions** (e.g. teachers, social workers, nurses) and **higher professions** (doctors, lawyers, accountants, etc.).
- *Savage et al.* (1992) distinguish between professions and welfare professions.
- Professionals generally have above-average incomes, but higher professionals/non-welfare professionals are particularly well paid. Both tend to have greater security and more fringe benefits than most other workers.

The functionalist perspective on the professions

Functionalists such as Bernard Barber (1963) see professional jobs as having distinctive attributes:

- Possession of a body of specialist knowledge.
- Concern for the interests of the community.
- Control of behaviour through a code of ethics.
- High rewards and prestige, reflecting their contribution to society.

Criticisms of functionalism

- 1 Many have criticized the professions – e.g. lawyers have been accused of mystifying the law; teachers have been attacked for allowing underachievement, Harold Shipman murdered many of his patients. *Illich* (1975) accuses doctors of hiding the damaging effects of the environment.
- 2 Weberians and Marxists provide alternative views.

The Weberian perspective on the professions

Parry and Parry (1976) believe that professions serve their own interests rather than community interests.

- They restrict entry to the profession in order to limit the supply of qualified workers in order to ensure they get high wages.
- **Professional associations** tend to protect and defend the image of the profession rather than protecting the public.
- Professional associations ensure that their members have a **monopoly**, thus protecting their interests.
- Professionalism is seen as a **market strategy** designed to maximize the security and rewards of a particular job, not as a characteristic of particular types of work.
- Higher professions get paid more than lower professions simply because they have achieved **monopoly status** (e.g. doctors and the BMA compared to teachers and their unions).

Macdonald – the professional project

Macdonald (1997) argues that groups of workers undertake what he calls the **professional project** – they organize to get their work accepted as professional using techniques such as **social closure** (excluding others), establishing their own jurisdiction and attaining respectability.

Professions as servants of the powerful

C. Wright Mills (1951) suggests that professions increasingly serve the **interests of the powerful** rather than their own interests. Professionals are largely employed by the rich or by large corporations and have to serve those who pay them.

The deskilling of professions

Braverman (1974) argued that professional work was being **deskilled** (the skill was being removed from it) as the work was increasingly controlled by the powerful.

The declining independence of the professions

Several sociologists have pointed to the **declining independence** of professionals. For example, *Johnson* (1972) argues that accountants have to be loyal to their company above their profession.

The Ehrenreichs – the professional-managerial class

The Ehrenreichs (1979) do not see professions as a separate group. They put forward a neo-Marxist view that there is a distinct **professional-managerial class** making up 20–25% of the population.

They see this class as carrying out vital functions for capitalism:

- Organizing production.
- Controlling the working class.

- Promoting ruling-class ideology.
- Developing a consumer goods market.

There is conflict between this group and the working class, because the professional-managerial class serve the interests of the ruling class, and the working class sometimes resist their control.

Criticisms

- 1 Marxists such as E.O. Wright (1978) do not see this group as a distinctive class but merely as intermediate strata.
- 2 Weberian theorists see the middle classes in terms of market situation rather than the functions they perform for capitalism.

THE LOWER MIDDLE CLASS

This group includes clerical workers, secretaries and shop assistants.

According to the **proletarianization thesis** (supported by Marxists) this group has been proletarianized – they have become working-class.

Harry Braverman (1974) argues that they have been **deskilled** – e.g. clerical workers have gone from a virtual managerial role to doing very routine work.

Weberians tend to argue that the lower middle class remains distinct from the working class.

David Lockwood (1958) argues that the lower middle class has:

- 1 A better market situation than the working class, with higher wages, job security and promotion prospects.
- 2 A better work situation, working closely with managers and not being closely supervised.
- 3 A superior status situation: their work has more prestige than manual work.

Stewart, Prandy and Blackburn (1980), in a study of large firms, argue that most male clerical workers remain middle-class because their jobs are often stepping-stones to junior management positions.

Crompton and Jones (1984) are critical of the Weberian views above. They argue that:

- 1 Most clerical workers are female and their promotion prospects are much lower than those of men.
- 2 Many supposed managerial positions to which clerical workers are promoted are themselves routine.
- 3 Clerical jobs have been deskilled and are now proletarian, whatever the prospects for individuals holding those positions.

Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler (1988), in their survey of 1,770 British people, found no evidence of deskilling or loss of autonomy at work among clerical workers. However, they found that **personal service workers** (who are largely female) had very little control or autonomy at work, and they could be regarded as working-class.

MIDDLE CLASS OR MIDDLE CLASSES

Giddens – the middle class

Giddens (1973) uses a Weberian perspective to claim that the middle class form a single group, with educational qualifications and the ability to sell their mental labour power.

Goldthorpe – the service and intermediate classes

Goldthorpe (1980) is also a Weberian but he distinguishes between a service class (larger employers, professionals, managers) and an intermediate class (clerical workers, small proprietors, technicians, etc.). The service class form a higher class of employees, who get increments on their salary and have pension rights and promotion prospects.

In later work Goldthorpe divides the middle class up according to whether they are employed, employers or self-employed.

Criticisms

Goldthorpe has been criticized for:

- 1 Failing to identify a difference between managers and employers and professionals.
- 2 Disagreeing with the Marxist view that big employers constitute a ruling class.

Roberts, Cook, Clark and Semeonoff – the fragmented middle class

Roberts *et al.* (1977) conducted a study of class images among 243 white-collar workers and distinguished four groups:

- 1 Those with middle-range, middle-class incomes had an image of society in which most people were middle-class (**middle-mass image**).
- 2 Small employers saw themselves as squeezed between a small upper class and a large mass of ordinary workers (**compressed middle-class image**).
- 3 Professionals tended to see society as a finely graded ladder of opportunity.
- 4 Clerical workers saw themselves as working-class (**proletarian image**).

Roberts *et al.* conclude that the middle class is fragmented.

Criticisms

This study is based on a small, all-male sample and includes only the subjective views of individuals rather than objective differences in their positions.

Abercrombie and Urry – the polarizing middle class

Abercrombie and Urry (1983) see the middle class as increasingly polarized between proletarianizing

routine white-collar workers and professionals and managers with advantaged market and work situations.

Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding

Savage et al. (1992) claim that the middle class can possess three different types of asset:

- 1 **Property assets**, which are owned in particular by the petty bourgeoisie.
- 2 **Organizational assets** – held, for example, by managers with jobs in large organizations.
- 3 **Cultural assets** – deriving from educational attainment and credentials – which are particularly concentrated amongst professionals.

Members of the middle class use their different types of asset to help their children gain middle-class positions.

These different types of asset can lead to differences of interest and division in the middle class.

In recent years another line of division has opened up between **public sector professionals** and better-rewarded **private sector professionals**, managers and the petty bourgeoisie.

Different middle-class groups tend to adopt different lifestyles:

- Public sector professionals tend to have a relatively healthy, ascetic lifestyle.
- Well-paid private sector professionals have a more extravagant postmodern lifestyle.
- Managers and civil servants have an undistinctive lifestyle.

Evaluation

This study may underestimate the power and influence of managers and oversimplify lifestyle differences. However, it does highlight important sources of division and discuss the changing nature of the middle classes.

Derek Wynne

Derek Wynne (1998) uses the ideas of **Pierre Bourdieu** (see pp. 14–15) in identifying divisions within the middle class on a private housing estate. Managers and professionals on the estate developed different lifestyles.

Managers largely gain middle-class status through the possession of **economic capital** and many base their lifestyle around drinking.

Professionals owe their middle-class status more to **cultural capital** and base their lifestyle more around taking part in sport.

Differences in leisure activity reflect differences in class background, education and occupation but differences in **consumption patterns** are increasingly important and these are starting to have the biggest role in shaping class.

Criticisms

Wynne's own research seems to suggest that class background remains more important than lifestyle choice in creating class differences.

THE WORKING CLASS

The working class tend to receive lower wages, enjoy less job security and receive fewer fringe benefits than the middle class.

They have significantly poorer **life chances**, such as lower life expectancy.

The issue of whether the working class share a distinctive **lifestyle** has been controversial.

In the 1960s, David Lockwood (1966) identified a group that he called **proletarian traditionalists**, who lived in close-knit working-class communities (e.g. coal miners) and exemplified traditional working-class culture. The main features of the culture were:

- Loyalty to workmates.
- Spending leisure time with workmates.
- A belief in pursuing goals collectively rather than individually.
- A fatalistic attitude to life (a belief that life chances depend on luck).
- A present-time orientation with an emphasis on **immediate gratification** (i.e. enjoy yourself now).
- A tendency to see class in terms of a division between 'us' (working people) and 'them' (the rich and powerful).
- **Segregated conjugal roles**, with men as the main breadwinners and women as home-makers.

These characteristics are diametrically opposed to supposed **middle-class values** such as individualism, a belief in deferred gratification (planning for the future), an image of society as a status hierarchy with opportunities for individuals, and joint conjugal roles.

Marx predicted an expanding and increasingly homogeneous and **class-conscious** working class, but some sociologists have argued that the working class is becoming smaller, more **fragmented** and less class conscious.

- Less than half the workforce now comprises manual workers, and in 2001 only 22% of men and 8% of women were employed in manufacturing. Traditional male manual work has declined most rapidly (e.g. shipbuilding, mining, mechanical engineering).
- New technology, the growth of more skilled work in high-technology companies and the increased employment of women may have fragmented the working class.
- Members of the working class may be less likely to see themselves as part of a united working class.

However, **Beynon** (1992) argues that we are not witnessing the 'end of the industrial worker'. Rather:

- Some manufacturing jobs have shifted abroad.

- Many so-called service sector jobs are actually related to production (e.g. working in McDonald's).
- Subcontracting redefines work such as cleaning factories as service sector work.

Thus, the working class remains bigger than statistics suggest.

EMBOURGEOISEMENT

This theory, first advocated in the 1950s by Kerr *et al.* and Bernard, suggested that well-paid affluent workers were becoming middle-class in terms of attitudes and lifestyle. If true this would undermine Marx's theory of an increasingly united and class-conscious working class.

Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt (1968a, 1968b, 1969) investigated the theory in a study of affluent manual workers and white-collar workers in Luton in the 1960s. They found:

- 1 Although affluent workers earned as much as routine white-collar workers they had inferior conditions of work and a poorer market situation (e.g. fewer promotion prospects).
- 2 They retained a collectivist outlook but support for unions was no longer based on unconditional loyalty. **Instrumental collectivism** (collective action if it would improve wages) had replaced solidaristic collectivism (based on strong loyalty).
- 3 Both affluent workers and white-collar workers had adopted a **privatized, home-centred lifestyle**, but the manual workers did not mix socially with the white-collar workers.
- 4 Most saw society in terms of a **pecuniary model**, in which position was largely determined by income.
- 5 They continued to be Labour voters, but for instrumental reasons rather than loyalty.

Goldthorpe *et al.* concluded that affluent workers made up a new working class of **privatized instrumentalists**, located between the traditional working class and the middle class.

Fiona Devine (1992) returned to Luton in the late 1980s to see how things had changed. She found that workers:

- 1 Continued to support unions but remained instrumental collectivists.
- 2 Continued to choose largely working-class friends and retained fairly traditional conjugal roles.
- 3 Still had a pecuniary model of society.
- 4 Retained fairly left-wing political views, but some were disillusioned with the Labour Party, and some intended to vote Conservative.

Devine concluded that they were less individualistic than the affluent workers in Goldthorpe *et al.*'s study, and she felt that they had retained significant features of traditional working-class attitudes and lifestyle.

Marshall, Newby, Rose and Vogler (1988) conducted a large survey on class in Britain in the 1980s, and found

evidence of some **sectionalism, instrumentalism and privatism**. But they argued that these characteristics were nothing new – they dated back to the nineteenth century – and they therefore denied that there had been any major change in the working class.

Divisions in the working class

Ralph Dahrendorf (1959) in the 1950s argued that the working class was increasingly divided by **skill level**, with a growing proportion of skilled workers anxious to maintain higher wages and status. He claimed that there had been a 'decomposition' of the working class.

Roger Penn (1983) studied cotton and engineering industries in Rochdale between 1856 and 1964 and found that skill divisions had long existed, and there was no evidence that they were becoming much more significant.

Ivor Crewe (1983), on the other hand, claims that there is an increasing division between a growing **new working class** and a shrinking **old working class**. The new working class:

- Live in the south.
- Are not union members.
- Work in private industry.
- Own their own home.
- Tend to vote Conservative.

The old working class, in contrast, live in other areas of the country, are union members and council tenants, work in the public sector, and tend to vote Labour.

However, Marshall *et al.* (1988) found that class continued to have more influence on voting than the **sectoral divisions** identified by Crewe.

Warwick and Littlejohn (1992) studied mining communities in the 1980s and found some divisions between the more successful workers, who were able to buy their council houses, and the less successful who suffered from unemployment. However, these divisions were based on **economic differences** not level of skill.

Class consciousness

While Marx predicted growing **class consciousness**, the evidence suggests that it is not happening.

In Goldthorpe *et al.*'s 1960s study of affluent workers in Luton, and in more recent social surveys, most of the working-class subjects see wage inequality as necessary. The Luton workers saw little direct conflict of interest between themselves and managers. However, this and other studies have found that workers still tend to agree with statements such as 'big business has too much power'.

Thus some sociologists believe that the **seeds of class consciousness** are still there. Devine found that 1980s Luton workers, conscious of inequality and injustice, still looked to unions and the Labour Party to tackle such issues, but they had little faith that they could achieve much.

Sociologists such as Blackburn and Mann (1975) argue that the working class show inconsistencies and contradictions in their views. They experience exploitation and subordination at work, which encourage class consciousness, but the mass media and the ideology of the dominant class undermine class consciousness.

Marshall *et al.* also found contradictory beliefs: many of the working class in their sample were aware of injustice and inequality but were ambivalent about taking steps to reduce inequality. Overall Marshall *et al.* found considerable potential for class consciousness, in terms of seeing society as unfair, but they criticized the Labour Party for failing to mobilize and harness this sense of dissatisfaction.

THE LOWER STRATA

Some sociologists have argued that there is a class underneath the working class. This class is often referred to as the **underclass**.

Murray – the underclass in America and Britain

Charles Murray (1989) puts forward a cultural view of the underclass. He argues that, in America and more recently in Britain, there is a growing underclass defined in terms of behaviour and attitudes. It includes:

- Single parents.
- The unemployed who did not want to work.
- Those making a living from crime.

In America, a large proportion of the underclass is black.

The underclass reject values such as honesty and hard work. Welfare payments allow people to become single parents, and children lack the role-model of a hard-working father, thus perpetuating underclass attitudes.

Criticisms

- 1 This cultural theory neglects economic divisions.
- 2 It ignores structural factors which might cause lack of economic success – e.g. lack of employment opportunities, the decline of manual work.
- 3 It blames the disadvantaged for their problems (see pp. 50–1 for further criticisms).

Giddens – the underclass and the dual labour market

Giddens (1973) has a more economic theory of the underclass. He sees them as workers who tend to find jobs in the **secondary labour market** (low-paid, insecure jobs with few prospects). Employers tend to recruit women and ethnic minorities into such jobs, partly because of discrimination and prejudice.

The underclass have more radical views than the working class who are in secure employment.

Criticisms

Kirk Mann (1982) argues that there is no clear dividing line between the primary (secure, well-paid work) and secondary labour markets.

He claims that Giddens fails to give a convincing explanation of why women and ethnic minorities are in secondary employment (see pp. 39–40 for a discussion of ethnicity and the underclass).

Gallie – the heterogeneity of the underclass

Gallie (1988, 1994) argues that the underclass is too heterogeneous to be seen as a single class. He found big differences in the employment situations of women and members of ethnic minorities, and points out that there is a big flow into and out of unemployment.

The underclass also includes diverse age groups, and they often have different interests. They are therefore unlikely to develop shared consciousness.

Gallie found no evidence that the long-term unemployed were resigned to being without work and little evidence of a political split between the working class and the underclass.

However, Gallie does think that the **long-term unemployed** may form a distinct group

Runciman – the underclass as claimants

W.G. Runciman (1990) sees the underclass as consisting of those reliant upon benefits, with little chance of being able to participate in paid employment. This places them in a different economic situation from even low-paid workers.

Criticisms

- 1 Dean and Taylor-Gooby (1992) criticize Runciman for failing to take into account the large numbers who escape from reliance upon benefits. This makes any supposed underclass highly unstable.
- 2 Dean argues that the term underclass is used imprecisely in a variety of ways, often with the implication that the disadvantaged are to blame for their problems. He therefore argues that it should no longer be used.

CLASS IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Pierre Bourdieu

Bourdieu (1984) sees cultural aspects of class as being as important as economic aspects. **Economic, cultural and lifestyle** factors interact to shape your life chances.

There are four types of capital related to class.

- 1 **Economic capital** consists of wealth and income.
- 2 **Cultural capital** includes educational qualifications and knowledge of the arts. In the latter sense there are different levels of cultural capital:
 - a **Legitimate culture** is held by dominant classes and is seen as good taste, e.g. classical music.

- b Middlebrow culture is held by middle classes.
 - c Popular taste held by lower classes and seen as having little value, e.g. pop music.
- Cultural capital also relates to **lifestyle and consumption**, e.g. the foods you eat.

- 3 **Social capital** consists of social connections and friendships.
- 4 **Symbolic capital**, similar to status, concerns reputation.

Different types of capital can be used to achieve upward mobility. Sometimes one type of capital can be used to gain another, e.g. economic capital can be used to pay for private education to gain cultural capital.

Groups whose position is based on different types of capital tend to develop a different **habitus**. The habitus consists of the different ways a group perceives the world and the different tastes and perceptions they have. The habitus of a group changes over time.

Criticisms

- 1 Some see the theory as underestimating individual choice by assuming that people tend to conform to their habitus.
- 2 Bourdieu may neglect the importance of institutions such as the welfare state in shaping class.

Simon Charlesworth – a phenomenology of working-class experience

- Charlesworth (2000) studied working-class life in Rotherham.
- The **habitus** of the working class was reflected in the way they dressed, their comportment and nights out.
- Lacking symbolic and cultural capital life is a daily struggle which creates a **culture of necessity**.
- Education plays a crucial role in encouraging people to devalue themselves

Beverley Skeggs – Formations of Class and Gender

- Skeggs (1997) studied working-class women on caring courses in an FE college.
- The women lacked economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital.
- The women sought to disidentify themselves from the working class by trying to show that they were respectable, responsible and by avoiding being seen as 'tarts' or 'sluts'.
- However, they wanted to be seen as desirable to maximise their value in the 'marriage market'.

Conclusion

These studies suggest that class continues to exert a strong influence on people's lifestyle and life chances through the interaction of cultural and economic aspects of class.

SOCIAL MOBILITY IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY

- **Open societies** allow social mobility (movement between strata) whereas closed ones do not.

- **Achieved status** means that your status depends upon what you do.
- **Ascribed status** means that your status is based upon who you are (e.g. kinship, gender, ethnicity, class background).
- Sociologists such as Parsons see industrial societies as increasingly open and based on achieved status.
- **Intragenerational mobility** refers to mobility within one generation – e.g. a person being promoted at work.
- **Intergenerational mobility** refers to mobility between generations – it is measured by comparing the occupational statuses of parents and children.

Glass – social mobility before 1949

In 1949 Glass did the first British study. It found low rates of **long-range mobility** (movement across several strata) and high rates of **self-recruitment** (recruitment of the children of class members) in the highest class.

Criticisms

Glass's research methods have been criticized for using an unrepresentative sample which failed to reflect the growing number employed in white-collar occupations.

THE OXFORD MOBILITY STUDY

In 1972 the Oxford Mobility Study provided more up-to-date and reliable data.

It divided the class structure into three main groups: the service class (highest), the working class (lowest) and an intermediate class.

It found higher rates of **long-range mobility** than Glass's study and high rates of **absolute mobility** (the total amount of social mobility). This was largely due to a considerable expansion of the service class, creating more room at the top of the stratification system. There were high rates of **upward mobility**.

However, **relative mobility** chances (the chances of those from different backgrounds achieving particular positions) remained unchanged. Thus children from the service class were much more likely to achieve positions in the service class than children from the working class. **Kellner and Wilby (1980)** summarize this as the **1:2:4 rule of relative hope** – for every child from the working class who ends up in the top class, two achieve this from the intermediate classes and four from the service class.

Trends since the Oxford Mobility Study

Goldthorpe and Payne (1986) used data from British election studies to show that from 1972 to 1983 relative mobility chances stayed about the same, despite further growth of the service class.

At the very top of the stratification system there is evidence that mobility is low. **Elite self-recruitment** tends to take place, whereby elite positions are filled by the children of those already in the elite.

The National Child Development Study (NCDS) (1997) found that 55% of sons stayed in the working class (compared to 57% in the Oxford study). However, there was more chance of working-class sons getting service-class jobs than in the Oxford study (26% as opposed to 16%).

Gender and mobility

- Most studies of mobility have used the class of the main breadwinner (usually a man) to determine the class of family members.
- Goldthorpe and Payne argue that other ways of determining the class of women (e.g. using their own jobs) make little difference to the overall findings of mobility studies.
- Anthony Heath, however, found that women from service-class backgrounds were more likely to be downwardly mobile than men from this class, while women from working-class backgrounds were more likely to be upwardly mobile than men. Heath believes that overall this disadvantages women rather than men.
- The NCDS (1997) also found that women from service-class background were less likely than men from this background to maintain their class position. Women were more likely than men to be upwardly or downwardly mobile to the intermediate class.

IS BRITAIN A MERITOCRACY?

A meritocracy is a social system in which life chances are based on merit.

Saunders – Unequal but Fair?

Peter Saunders (1996) argues that Britain is meritocratic.

- There is considerable upward mobility from the working class.
- Differences in the chances of those from different classes being upwardly mobile largely stem from inherited differences in terms of intelligence, talent and motivation.
- Saunders used data from the NCDS to claim that intergenerational mobility rates were higher than suggested in other studies and that class differences in mobility could be explained in terms of differences in ability and effort.

Criticisms

- 1 Saunders ignores the unemployed and those in part-time work.
- 2 Measured intelligence might itself be the result of class differences rather than inherited characteristics. Measures of effort (such as levels of absenteeism) might be related to the effects of labelling, ill-health, etc., which are class-related.
- 3 Marshall and Swift (1986) argue that Saunders has misinterpreted the figures and that, even when factors such as effort and intelligence are taken into account,

working-class children still do considerably worse than middle-class children.

- 4 Savage and Egerton (1997) examined the NCDS and found high rates of mobility but big differences in opportunities. For example, in the service class, 75% of high-ability sons and 67% of high-ability daughters ended up in the service class, compared to 45% of high-ability sons and 28% of high-ability daughters from the unskilled working class.

GENDER AND SOCIAL CLASS

The position of women in the class structure was neglected in many early studies – women were often assumed to simply have the same class as their husbands. However, increasingly this has been disputed. There are a number of viewpoints:

- 1 Frank Parkin (1972) argues that the life chances of women are largely determined by the position of the male breadwinner in a family.
- 2 Britten and Heath (1983) disagree, pointing out that there are an increasing number of cross-class families in which women have a better-paid, higher-status job than men.
- 3 Goldthorpe (1983) largely agrees with Parkin, arguing that the family is the unit of class analysis. However, he does concede that the class of the family should be taken from the head of household. This is usually the man, but it can be the woman – e.g. in single-parent households or where the woman has more commitment to paid employment than the man.
- 4 Michelle Stanworth (1984) argues that men and women should be placed in classes as individuals according to their jobs, not as members of families.
- 5 Rose and Marshall (1988) found that class fates (e.g. mobility chances) were more affected by the class of individuals, while class actions (e.g. who you voted for) could be better predicted by the family's class.

CONTEMPORARY THEORIES OF STRATIFICATION

The death of class?

The postmodernists Pakulski and Waters (1996) claim that class is losing its significance.

- People no longer feel that they belong to classes, and supposed classes include a big variety of people.
- New cleavages are more important in shaping people's social and political beliefs than class.
- Towards the end of the twentieth century, stratification became based on cultural differences rather than economic ones.
- Lifestyle and identity have become more important than economic differences – e.g. your status is more to do with the décor of your house than the job you have.
- Some low-paid jobs (e.g. in the media) have higher status than better-paid jobs.

- As a result, stratification systems are more **fragmented and fluid** than previous class systems; it is easier to change status than it once was.

Pakulski and Waters explain the death of class in terms of:

- 1 The increasing importance of educational qualifications in shaping status.
- 2 The declining importance of privately owned property compared to property owned by organizations.
- 3 A wider distribution of wealth, giving more people greater lifestyle choices and more opportunity to choose what they consume according to their taste.
- 4 **Globalization**, which has reduced the importance of class inequalities within countries.
- 5 The growth of **new politics** based around non-class issues such as ethnicity and religion.

Criticisms

- 1 Harriet Bradley (1997) argues that Pakulski and Waters have no consistent definition of class.
- 2 They ignore the extent to which economic class differences still affect what people can afford and therefore what lifestyle choices they can make.
- 3 Marshall (1997) argues that they are highly selective in the arguments and evidence they use and tend to neglect evidence that economic class inequalities are still a major factor in shaping people's lives.

Ulrich Beck – Risk Society

Beck (1992) believes societies have moved from **simple modernity** to **reflexive** or **late modernity**.

- In **simple modernity** most conflict is about the distribution of wealth.
- In **reflexive modernity** technology increases production and reduces material need, making class divisions less important.
- There is increasing concern with **risk** created by science and technology rather than material need.
- Risks are associated with obesity from processed foods, the possibility of nuclear accidents and toxins in the environment.
- All social classes are subject to these risks, not just lower classes.
- Late modernity involves **reflexivity** or reflection on these risks.
- People experience risk as individuals, and society becomes **individualized** as class identities become weaker.

Criticisms

- 1 Scott (2000) argues that wealth does enable you to avoid some risks.
- 2 Beck may underestimate the extent to which wealth still shapes life chances.
- 3 Beck ignores empirical research which shows that class still shapes identity.

Westergaard – the hardening of class inequality

John Westergaard (1995, 1997) argues that, far from disappearing, class inequalities are hardening.

He sees class in Marxist/Weberian terms as determined by a person's position in the economic order.

- There is strong evidence of **increasing inequality**:
- In Britain the highest-paid 10% of white-collar workers had a 40% increase in real wages from 1980 to 1990, while the poorest 10% of manual workers had no rise in pay.
- From the 1970s to the 1980s the share of all income earned by the richest 20% of households increased from 37% to 44%, while the share of the poorest 20% of households fell from 10% to 7%.
- Privately owned wealth was becoming more concentrated in the hands of a few in the 1980s.
- The power of big business has been growing as a result of **privatization** and the adoption of **free-market policies**.

Westergaard sees the reasons for these changes as lying in government policies and the growth of **transnational corporations**.

He accepts that **lifestyle and consumption** have become increasingly related to **identity**. However, he sees these as strongly influenced by economic differences such as wage inequality.

Gender divisions tend to reinforce class inequality. In middle-class families, the man and the woman may have well-paid jobs, whereas few working-class families benefit from one partner's higher white-collar salary.

Ethnic divisions are closely related to class, with some ethnic minorities tending to be concentrated towards the bottom of the stratification system.

Westergaard accepts that **class consciousness** may have declined but he partly attributes this to the Labour Party's failure to express and mobilize dissatisfaction in society.

Class consciousness has the potential to revive, as surveys show continued dissatisfaction with inequality in British society.

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

- 1 Which one of these is an example of achieved status?
 - a The high status of whites in South Africa before the abolition of apartheid
 - b The high status of men in some societies
 - c The high status of cabinet ministers in British government
 - d The high status of hereditary peers in Britain
- 2 False class consciousness involves:
 - a Making less money than other people
 - b Being aware you are being exploited
 - c Being unaware of where the true interests of your class lie
 - d Becoming revolutionary
- 3 In Weber's sociology, your class position is determined by:
 - a A combination of whether or not you own property and your position in the labour market
 - b Your position in the labour market alone
 - c Whether you own property
 - d Your status
- 4 Which two of these statements describe changes in the British occupational structure during the twentieth century?
 - a An increasing proportion of paid jobs were held by women
 - b The proportion employed in manufacturing increased
 - c The proportion of people employed in manual work increased
 - d White-collar employment grew
- 5 In 1999 the richest 10% of the British population owned what proportion of marketable wealth?
 - a 10%
 - b 42%
 - c 54%
 - d 64%
- 6 Which two of these statements describe the Weberian view of the professions?
 - a The professions serve the public interest
 - b The professions predominantly serve the interests of the rich and powerful
 - c Professionalism can be seen as a market strategy
 - d Professions largely serve their own interests
- 7 According to Savage, Barlow, Dickens and Fielding, a part-time university lecturer without a permanent contract would be a member of the middle class because they possessed:
 - a Property assets
 - b Organizational assets
 - c Cultural assets
 - d Personal assets
- 8 Which two of these developments did Marx predict would occur in the working class?
 - a The working class would become more affluent
 - b The working class would adopt middle-class lifestyles
 - c The working class would eventually become aware that they were being exploited
 - d The working class would get poorer in comparison with higher classes
- 9 Which one of these groups does Charles Murray not see as part of the underclass?
 - a Pensioners
 - b Single parents
 - c Criminals
 - d The work-shy
- 10 Which of these would be an example of social capital in Bourdieu's theory of class?
 - a Having lots of friends.
 - b Having a large bank balance.
 - c Having a knowledge of classical music.
 - d Knowing how to dress fashionably.
- 11 If the daughter of a coal miner becomes a manager this is an example of:
 - a Intragenerational upward mobility
 - b Horizontal mobility
 - c Intergenerational upward mobility
 - d Short-range intragenerational mobility
- 12 Which of these is not one of the reasons put forward by Pakulski and Waters for the 'death of class'?
 - a Globalization
 - b A wider distribution of wealth
 - c The increased importance of qualifications in determining status
 - d All workers enjoying good wages
- 13 Which two of the following statements accurately describe Ulrich Beck's theory?
 - a We now live in simple modernity
 - b Class is increasingly important as a source of identity
 - c People from all backgrounds are concerned about risks
 - d Class is less important than it used to be
- 14 According to John Westergaard, class differences are:
 - a Staying much the same
 - b Hardening
 - c Reducing
 - d Disappearing
- 15 Supporters of which two of these theoretical approaches are most likely to see Britain as meritocratic?
 - a Marxism
 - b The New Right
 - c Functionalism
 - d Weberian theories