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Stratification and Social Class
Have you ever bought an Indian meal in a supermarket? If you have, there's a strong chance that it was made by Noon Products. The company specializes in supplying Indian food to the big supermarket chains and has an annual turnover of around £90 million. In 2005 it was taken over by Irish food company, Kerry Group. Company founder, Sir Gulam Noon, was estimated to have amassed a fortune of £65 million, according to the 2006 Sunday Times Rich List.

Gulam Noon was born in India. His family owned a sweet shop in Bombay: 'Royal Sweets'. They were not particularly well off, but managed to get by until their father's death when Gulam was 7. After that it was a struggle, and, as a young teenager, Gulam would combine school with work in the shop. Having
completed school, he joined the family business full time. He soon changed the way the business was marketed, expanded the shop and built a factory. His ambitions, however, were not limited to 'Royal Sweets', and other ventures quickly followed, including printing and construction ventures.

Not satisfied with his successes in India, Gulam moved to England to further his experience. He established 'Royal Sweets' in Southall, London, and brought chefs with him from India to run the business. Within the year there were nine shops, built around the Asian communities of London and Leicester. Today, the 'Royal Sweets' chain has 40 shops and an annual turnover of £2 million.

Other commercial ventures followed the success of 'Royal Sweets', and in 1989 Noon Products was established. Gulam spotted a niche in the market: all the pre-packaged Indian ready meals available from the supermarkets were insipid and frankly unacceptable. He thought he could do better. 'The business began with just 11 employees, but soon they were selling authentic Indian foods to the frozen food company Birds Eye, and then to the supermarket chains Waitrose and Sainsbury's.

There are now more than 100 different Noon dishes, produced in three plants, operated by 1,400 employees. Between 250,000 and 300,000 meals are made every day. The produce range has been expanded from Indian food to include Thai and Mexican dishes, amongst others. In 2002 Gulam was knighted for his services to the food industry. Reflecting on what has inspired him during his life, Sir Gulam concludes: 'I'm a self-made man and a quick learner! Nothing comes easily, you've just got to work at it.'

Few of us can expect the kind of wealth that Sir Gulam now possesses. But his rise to riches is a rare success story. In societies characterized by class and status, achieving such success is rare. How many people have to work in his business, and are they paid their 'fair share' for the success of the company? The issues of wealth and poverty raised by Sir Gulam's life story lead us to broader questions. Why do economic inequalities exist in contemporary societies? How do social factors influence your economic position in society? Are your chances any different if you are a woman? How does globalization affect your life chances? These are just a few of the sorts of questions that sociologists ask and try to answer, and they are the focus of this chapter.

The study of inequalities in society is one of the most important areas of sociology, because our material resources determine a great deal about our lives. Here, we begin by looking at what sociologists mean when they talk about stratification and class. We then look at some of the most influential theories of class, and attempt to measure it, in sociological thought, after which we take a more detailed look at social class in Western society today. We close with a discussion of social mobility and conclude by briefly considering the continuing importance of social class in explaining our understanding of the world around us.

**Systems of stratification**

Sociologists use the concept of social stratification to describe inequalities that exist between individuals and groups within human societies. Often we think of stratification in terms of assets or property, but it can also occur because of other attributes, such as gender, age, religious affiliation or military rank.

Individuals and groups enjoy differential (unequal) access to rewards based on their position within the stratification scheme. Thus, stratification can most simply be defined as structured inequalities between different groupings of people. It is useful to think of stratification as rather like the geological layering of rock in the earth's surface. Societies can be seen as consisting of 'strata' in a hierarchy, with the more favoured at the top and the less privileged nearer the bottom.

All socially stratified systems share three basic characteristics:

1. The rankings apply to social categories of people who share a common characteristic without necessarily interacting or identifying with one another. For example, women may be ranked differently from men or wealthy people differently from the poor. This does not mean that individuals from a particular category cannot change their rank; however, it does mean that the category continues to exist even if individuals move out of it and into another category.

2. People's life experiences and opportunities depend heavily on how their social category is ranked. Being male or female, black or white, upper class or working class makes a big difference in terms of your life chances—often as big a difference as personal effort or good fortune (such as winning a lottery).

3. The ranks of different social categories tend to change very slowly over time. In the industrialized societies, for example, only recently have women as a whole begun to achieve equality with men.

**Gender inequalities are discussed more fully in chapter 4, "Security and Gender."**

As discussed in chapter 4, stratified societies have changed throughout human
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History. In the earliest human societies, which were based on hunting and gathering, there was very little social stratification—mainly because there was very little by way of wealth or other resources to be divided up. The development of agriculture produced considerably more wealth and, as a result, a great increase in stratification. Social stratification in agricultural societies increasingly came to resemble a pyramid, with a large number of people at the bottom and a successively smaller number of people as one moves towards the top. Today, industrial and post-industrial societies are extremely complex; their stratification is more likely to resemble a teardrop, with a large number of people in the middle and lower-middle ranks (the so-called middle class), a slightly smaller number of people at the bottom, and very few people as one moves towards the top.

Thinking Critically
Should we assume that stratification is 'natural' and therefore inevitable? If not, how might we explain the persistence of stratification in human societies? In what ways could stratification systems be functional for society as a whole?

Historically, four basic systems of stratification can be distinguished: slavery, caste, estates and class. These are sometimes found in conjunction with one another: slavery, for instance, existed alongside classes in ancient Greece and Rome, and in the Southern United States before the Civil War of the 1860s.

Slavery

Slavery is an extreme form of inequality, in which certain people are owned as property by others. The legal conditions of slave ownership have varied considerably among different societies. Sometimes slaves were deprived of almost all rights by law—as was the case on Southern plantations in the United States—while in other societies, their position was more akin to that of servants. For example, in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens, some slaves occupied positions of great responsibility. They were excluded from political positions and from the military, but were accepted in most other types of occupation. Some were literate and worked as government administrators; many were trained in crafting skills. Even so, not all slaves could count on such good luck. For the less fortunate, their days began and ended in hard labor in the mines.

Throughout history, slaves have often fought back against their subjection; the slave rebellions in the American South before the Civil War are one example. Because of such resistance, systems of slave labor have tended to be unstable. High productivity could only be achieved through constant supervision and brutal punishment. Slave-labor systems eventually broke down, partly because of the struggles they provoked and partly because economic or other incentives motivate people to produce more effectively than does direct compulsion. Slavery is simply not economically efficient. Moreover, from about the eighteenth century on, many people in Europe and America came to see slavery as morally wrong. Today, slavery is illegal in every country of the world, but it still exists in some places. Recent research has documented that people are taken by force and held against their will. From enslaved brick-makers in Pakistan to sex slaves in Thailand and domestic slaves in relatively wealthy countries like the UK and France, slavery remains a significant human rights violation in the world today and against many people's assumptions, seems to be increasing rather than diminishing (Bales 1999).

Caste

A caste system is a social system in which one's social position is given for a lifetime in caste societies, therefore, all individuals must remain at the social level of their birth throughout life. Everyone's social status is based on personal characteristics—such as perceived race or ethnicity (often based on such physical characteristics as skin color), parental religion or parental caste—that are accidents of birth and are therefore believed to be unchangeable. A person is born into a caste and remains there for life. In a sense, caste societies can be seen as a special type of class society, in which class position is ascribed at birth (Sharma 1999). They have typically been found in agricultural societies that have not yet developed industrial capitalist economies, such as rural India or South Africa prior to the end of white rule in 1992.

Prior to modern times, caste systems were found throughout the world. In Europe, for example, Jews were frequently treated as a separate caste, forced to live in restricted neighborhoods and barred from intermarrying (and in some instances even interacting) with non-Jews. The term 'ghetto' is said to derive from the Venetian word for 'foundry', the site of one of Europe's first official Jewish ghettos, established by the government of Venice in 1516. The term eventually came to refer to those sections of European towns where Jews were legally compelled to live, long before it was used to describe minority neighborhoods in US cities, with their caste-like qualities of racial and ethnic segregation.

In caste systems, intimate contact with members of other castes is strongly discouraged. Such 'purity' of a caste is often maintained by rules of endogamy, marriage within one's social group as required by custom or law.

Caste in India and South Africa

The few remaining caste systems in the world are being seriously challenged by globalization. The Indian caste system, for
Apartheid may be a thing of the past, but the wealth gap between white and black South Africans is still very apparent. These boys live in the rural and impoverished district of Luthuli, South Africa.

example, reflects Hindu religious beliefs and is more than 2,000 years old. According to Hindu beliefs, there are four major castes, each roughly associated with broad occupational groupings. The four castes consist of the Brahmins (scholars and spiritual leaders) on top, followed by the Kshatriyas (soldiers and rulers), the Vaisyas (farmers and merchants) and the Shudras (labourers and artisans). Beneath the four castes are those known as the ‘untouchables’ or Dalits (‘oppressed people’), who – as their name suggests – are to be avoided at all costs. Untouchables are limited to the worst jobs in society, such as removing human waste, and they often resort to begging and searching in garbage for their food. In traditional areas of India, some members of higher castes still regard physical contact with untouchables to be so contaminating that a mere touch requires cleansing rituals. India made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of caste in 1949, but aspects of the system remain in full force today, particularly in rural areas.

As India’s modern capitalist economy brings people of different castes together, whether it is in the same workplace, aeroplane or restaurant, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the rigid barriers required to sustain the caste system. As more and more of India is influenced by globalization, it seems reasonable to assume that its caste system will weaken still further.

Before its abolition in 1992, the South African caste system, termed apartheid, rigidly separated black Africans, Indians, ‘coloureds’ (people of mixed races) and Asians from whites. In this case, caste was based entirely on race. Whites, who made up only 15 per cent of the total population, controlled virtually all the country’s wealth, owned most of the usable land, ran the principal businesses and industries and had a monopoly on political power, since blacks lacked the right to vote. Blacks – who made up three-quarters of the population – were segregated into impoverished bantustans (‘homelands’) and were allowed out only to work for the white minority.

Apartheid, widespread discrimination and oppression created intense conflict between the white minority and the black, mixed-race and Asian majority. Decades of often violent struggle against apartheid finally proved successful in the 1990s. The most powerful black organization, the African National Congress (ANC), mobilized an economically devastating global boycott of South African businesses, forcing South Africa’s white leaders to dismantle apartheid, which was abolished by popular vote among South African whites in 1992. In 1994, in the country’s first ever multiracial elections, the black majority won control of the government, and Nelson Mandela – the black leader of the ANC, who had spent 27 years imprisoned by the white government – was elected president.

Estates

Estates were part of European feudalism, but also existed in many other traditional civilizations. The feudal estates consisted of strata with differing obligations and rights towards each other, some of these differences being established in law. In Europe, the highest estate was composed of the aristocracy and gentry. The clergy formed another estate, having lower status but possessing various distinctive privileges. Those in what came to be called the ‘third estate’ were the commoners – serfs, free peasants, merchants and artisans. In contrast to castes, a certain degree of intermarriage and mobility was tolerated between the estates. Commoners might be knighted, for example, in payment for special services given to the monarch; merchants could sometimes purchase titles.

A remnant of the system persists in Britain, where hereditary titles are still recognized (though since 1998 peers are no longer automatically entitled to vote in the House of Lords), and business leaders, civil servants and others may be honoured with a knighthood for their services.

Estates have tended to develop in the past wherever there was a traditional aristocracy based on noble birth. In feudal systems, such as in medieval Europe, estates were closely bound up with the manorial community; they formed a local, rather than a national, system of stratification. In more centralized traditional empires, such as China or Japan, they were organized on a more national basis. Sometimes the differences between the estates were justified by religious beliefs, although rarely in as strict a way as in the Hindu caste system.

Class

Class systems differ in many respects from slavery, castes or estates. We can define a class as a large-scale grouping of people who share common economic resources, which strongly influence the type of lifestyle they are able to lead. Ownership of wealth and occupation, are the chief bases of class differences. Classes differ from earlier forms of stratification in four main respects:

1. Class systems are fluid. Unlike the other types of strata, classes are not established by legal or religious provisions. The boundaries between classes are never clear-cut. There are no formal restrictions on intermarriage between people from different classes.
Class positions are in some part achieved. An individual’s class is not simply given at birth, as is the case in the other types of stratification systems. Social mobility – movement upward and downward in the class structure – is more common in the other types.

2 Class is economically based. Classes depend on economic differences between groups of individuals – inequalities in the possession of material resources. In the other types of stratification systems, non-economic factors (such as race in the former South African caste system) are generally most important.

3 Class systems are large-scale and impersonal. In the other types of stratification systems, inequalities are expressed primarily in personal relationships of duty or obligation – between slave and master or lower- and higher-caste individuals. Class systems, by contrast, operate mainly through large-scale, impersonal associations. For instance, one major basis of class differences is in inequalities of pay and working conditions.

Will caste give way to globalization?

There is some evidence that globalizing forces can hasten the end of legally sanctioned caste systems throughout the world. Most official caste systems have already given way to class-based ones in industrial capitalist societies; South Africa, mentioned earlier, is the most prominent recent example (Berger 1986). Modern industrial production requires that people move about freely, work at whatever jobs they are suited for, and change jobs frequently according to economic conditions. The rigid restrictions found in caste systems interfere with this necessary freedom. Furthermore, as the world increasingly becomes a single economic unit, caste-like relationships will become increasingly vulnerable to economic pressures. Nonetheless, elements of caste persist even in post-industrial societies.

For example, some Asian immigrants to the West seek to arrange traditional marriages for their children along caste lines. The next section looks at sociological theories, which seek to explain the persistence of social stratification in human societies. Most sociologists who have addressed this question have been strongly influenced by the social class systems of the modern world and the discussion below reflects this.

**THINKING CRITICALLY**

What evidence is there from around the world that, in time, social class is likely to become the dominant form of stratification in all the countries of the world? Given what we know about other forms of stratification, on balance, would this be a positive or negative development?

**Theories of class and stratification**

The theories developed by Karl Marx and Max Weber form the basis of most sociological analyses of class and stratification. Scholars working in the Marxist tradition have further developed the ideas Marx himself set out and others have tried to elaborate on Weber’s contributions. We shall begin by examining the theories set forth by Marx and Weber before analyzing the more recent non-Marxist ideas of American sociologist, Erik Olin Wright.

**Karl Marx’s theory of class conflict**

Most of Marx’s works were concerned with stratification in society and, above all, with social class, yet surprisingly he failed to provide a systematic analysis of the concept of class. The manuscript Marx was working on at the time of his death (subsequently published as *Capital*, vol. 3) provides an outline of a doctrine of class conflict.

The research problem

Industrialization in Europe in the nineteenth century transformed societies, arguably, for the better. But it also led to protests and revolts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Why did workers oppose industrialization? Later, an industrial society developed in the twentieth century. Strikes and Muslim workers’ activity continually occurred. Again, why have workers protested as societies became more wealthy? Karl Marx (1818-83) spent most of his adult life attempting to understand how societies work and his most consistent argument was that industrial societies were rooted in capitalist economic relations. Marx was not just a detached academic observer though; he was also a key figure in communist political debates and an activist in workers’ movements. For Marx, industrial capitalism, for all its progressive elements, was founded on an exploitative system of class relations that led to the oppression of the majority of working people.

**Marx’s explanation**

For Marx, a social class is a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the process of production – the means by which they live. Before the rise of modern industry, the means of production consisted primarily of land and the instruments used to tend crops or raise animals. In pre-industrial societies, therefore, the two main classes consisted of those who owned the land (peasants, petty nobility, or slave holders) and those actively engaged in producing from it (peasants, owners, and free peasants). In modern industrial societies, factories, offices, machinery and the capital needed to buy them have become more important. The two main classes consisted of those who own these new means of production (industrialists or capitalists) and those who earn their living by selling their labor to them – the working class or, in the new society that arose, the proletariat.

According to Marx, the relationship between classes is an antagonistic one. In feudal societies, exploitation often took the form of the direct transfer of produce from the peasants to the aristocracy. Serfs were compelled to give a certain proportion of their production to their aristocratic master, or had to work for a number of days each month in his fields to produce crops to be consumed by him and his relations. In modern capitalist societies, the source of exploitation is less obvious, and Marx devoted much attention to trying to clarify its nature. In the course of the working day, Marx reasoned, workers produce more than is actually needed by employers to repay the cost of hiring them. This surplus value is the source of profit, which capitalists are able to put to their own use. A group of workers in a clothing factory, say, might be able to produce 150 units a day. Selling 70 per cent of the units provides enough income for the manufacturer to pay the workers’ wages and for the cost of plant and equipment. Income from the sale of the remainder of the garments is taken as profit.

Marx was struck by the inequalities created by the capitalist system. Although in earlier times aristocrats lived a life of luxury, comparatively different from that of the peasant, agrarian societies were relatively poor. Even if there had been no aristocracy, standards of living would inevitably have been maintained. With the development of modern industry, however, wealth is produced on a scale far beyond anything seen before, but workers have little access to this wealth that their labor created. They remain relatively poor, while the wealth accumulated by the privileged class grows. Marx used the term “exploitation” to describe the process by which the working class grew increasingly impoverished in relation to the capitalist class. Even if workers become more affluent in absolute terms, they remain separated from the capitalist class and are continuously subjected to exploitation through the capitalist class.

These inequalities between the capitalist and the working class were not strictly economic in nature. Marx noted how the development of modern factories and the mechanization of production means that work frequently becomes dull and oppressive in the extreme. The labour
that this source of our wealth is often both physically wearying and mentally tedious — as in the case of a factory hand whose job consists of routine tasks undertaken day in, day out, in an unchanging environment.

**Critical points**

Rockological debates on Marx's ideas have been more or less continuous for the past 150 years, and it is quite impossible to do justice to them here. Instead, we can point to several major themes in Marxist criticism. Firstly, Marx's characterization of capitalist society as spliting into 'two main camps'— owners and workers — has been seen as too simple. Even within the working class, there are divisions between skilled and unskilled workers, which work to prevent a clear convergence of class interests. Such divisions have endured and become more complex, with gender and ethnicity also becoming factors leading to internal competition and conflict. As a result, critics argue, concerted action by the whole of the working class is very unlikely.

Max Weber's forecast of a communist revolution led by the industrial working class in the advanced societies has not materialized, and this calls into question his analysis of the dynamics of capitalism. Some contemporary Marxists continue to see capitalism as a doomed system, which will collapse at some point in the future, but critics (some of them former Marxists) see little evidence of this. Indeed, the majority of the working class have become increasingly affluent property owners with more of a stake in the capitalist system than ever before.

**Finally, although Marx saw class-consciousness arising from the increasingly shared experiences of the working class, many critics of Marxism today argue that people identify less rather than more with their social class position. Instead, there are multiple sources of people's social identities, and class identification is not the most important for many people. Without a developing class-consciousness, there can be no concerted class action and, hence, no communist revolution.**

Again, critics see the long-term social trends moving away from Marx's theoretical predictions.

**Contemporary significance**

Marx's influence on the world has been enormous, and even though his major predictions have not been proved correct, the analysis of capitalism that he pioneered continues to inform our understanding of globalization processes. Indeed, it can be argued that the widespread acknowledgment of rapid globalization in the social sciences has given fresh impetus to Marxist studies, particularly with the recent emergence of international anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements.

See chapter 28, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', for a discussion of anti-globalization movements.

Max Weber: class, status and party

Weber's approach to stratification was built on the analysis developed by Marx, but he modified and elaborated it. Like Marx, Weber regarded society as characterized by conflicts over power and resources. Yet where Marx saw polarized class relations and economic issues at the heart of all social conflict, Weber developed a more complex, multidimensional view of society. Social stratification is not simply a matter of class, according to Weber, but is shaped by two further aspects: status and party. These three components — elements of stratification — produce an enormous number of possible positions within society, rather than the more rigid bipolar model proposed by Marx.

Although Weber accepted Marx's view that class is founded on objectively given economic conditions, he saw a greater variety of economic factors as important in class formation than were recognized by Marx. According to Weber, class divisions derive not only from control or lack of control of the means of production, but also from economic conditions that have nothing to do with property. Such resources include especially the skills and credentials, or qualifications, which affect the types of work people are able to obtain. Weber argued that an individual's market position strongly influences his or her overall life chances. Those in managerial or professional occupations earn more and have more favorable conditions of work, for example, than those in blue-collar jobs. The qualifications they possess, such as degrees, diplomas and the skills they have acquired, make them more 'marketable' than others without such qualifications. At a lower level, among blue-collar workers, skilled craftsmen are able to secure higher wages than the semi- or unskilled.

Status in Weber's theory refers to differences between social groups in the social honour or prestige they are accorded by others. In traditional societies, status was often determined on the basis of the first-hand knowledge of a person gained through multiple interactions in different contexts over a period of years. As societies grew more complex, it became impossible for status always to be accorded in this way. Instead, according to Weber, status came to be expressed through people's styles of life. Markers and symbols of status — such as housing, dress, manner of speech and occupation — all help to shape an individual's social standing in the eyes of others. People sharing the same status form a community in which there is a sense of shared identity.

While Marx argued that status distinctions are the result of class divisions in society, Weber argued that status often varies independently of class divisions. Possession of wealth normally tends to confer high status, but there are many exceptions. The term 'gentleman poverty' refers to one example. In Britain, for example, individuals from aristocratic families continue to enjoy class advantages even when they have lost their fortunes. Conversely, 'new money' is often looked on with some scorn by the well-established wealthy.

In modern societies, Weber pointed out, party formation is an important aspect of power, and can influence stratification independently of class. Party defines a group of individuals who work together because they have common backgrounds, aims or interests. Often a party works in an organized fashion towards a specific goal which is in the interest of the party membership. Marx tended to explain both social differences and party organization in terms of class. Neither, in fact, can be reduced to class divisions, Weber argued, even though each is influenced by the other both can in turn influence the economic circumstances of individuals and groups, thereby affecting class. Parties may appeal to concerns cutting across class and status differences; for example, parties may be based on religious affiliation or nationalist ideals. A Marxist might attempt to explain the conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in class terms, since more Catholics than Protestants are in working-class jobs. A follower of Weber would argue that such an explanation is ineffective, because many Protestants are also from working-class backgrounds. The parties to which people are affiliated express religious as well as class differences.

Weber's writings on stratification are important, because they show that other
dimensions of stratification besides class strongly influence people's lives. While Marx saw social class as the key social division, Weber drew attention to the complex interplay of class, status and party as separate aspects of social stratification creating a more flexible basis for empirical analyses of stratification.

Erik Olin Wright's theory of class

The American sociologist Erik Olin Wright has developed an influential theory of class which combines aspects of both Marx's and Weber's approaches (Wright 1975, 1985, 1997). According to Wright, there are three dimensions of control over economic resources in modern capitalist production, and these allow us to identify the major classes that exist:

- control over investments or money capital
- control over the physical means of production (land or factories and offices)
- control over labour power

Those who belong to the capitalist class have control over each of these dimensions in the production system. Members of the working class have control over none of them. In between these two main classes, however, are the groups whose position is more ambiguous - the managers and white-collar workers mentioned above. These people are in what Wright calls contradictory class locations, because they are able to influence some aspects of production, but are denied control over others. White-collar and professional employees, for example, have to contract their labour power to employers in order to make a living in the same way as manual workers do. But at the same time they have a greater degree of control over the work setting than most people in blue-collar jobs. Wright terms the class position of such workers 'contradictory', because they are neither capitalists nor manual workers, yet they share certain common features with each. A large segment of the population - 85 to 90 per cent, according to Wright (1975) - falls into the category of those who are forced to sell their labour because they do not control the means of production. Yet within this population there is a great deal of diversity, ranging from the traditional manual working class to white-collar workers. In order to differentiate class locations within this large population, Wright takes two factors into account: the control of authority and the possession of skills or expertise. First, Wright argues that many middle-class workers, such as managers and supervisors, enjoy relationships towards authority that are more privileged than those of the working class. Such individuals are called on by capitalists to assist in controlling the working class - for example, by monitoring an employee's work or by conducting personnel reviews and evaluations - and are rewarded for their 'loyalty' by earning higher wages and receiving regular promotions. Yet, at the same time, these individuals remain under the control of the capitalist owners. In other words, they are both exploiters and exploited.

The second factor which differentiates class locations within the middle class is the possession of skills and expertise. According to Wright, middle-class employees possessing skills which are in demand in the labour market are able to exercise a specific form of power in the capitalist system. Given that their expertise is in short supply, they are able to earn a higher wage. The lucrative positions available to information technology specialists in the emerging knowledge economy illustrate this point. Moreover, Wright argues, because employees with knowledge and skills are more difficult to monitor and control, employers are obliged to secure their loyalty and cooperation by rewarding them accordingly.

Measuring class

Both theoretical and empirical studies have investigated the link between class standing and other dimensions of social life, such as voting patterns, educational attainment and physical health. Yet, as we have seen, the concept of class is far from clear-cut. Both in academic circles and in common usage, the term 'class' is understood and used in a wide variety of ways. How, then, can sociologists and researchers measure such an imprecise concept for the purpose of empirical studies?

When an abstract concept such as class is transformed into a measurable variable in a study, we say that the concept has been operationalized. This means that it has been defined clearly and concretely enough to be tested through empirical research. Sociologists have operationalized class through a variety of schemes which attempt to map the class structure of society. Such schemes provide a theoretical framework by which individuals are allocated to social class categories.

A common feature of most class schemes is that they are based on the occupational structure. Sociologists have seen class divisions as corresponding generally with material and social inequalities that are linked to types of employment. The development of capitalism and industrialization has been marked by a growing division of labour and an increasingly complicated occupational structure. Although no longer as true as it once was, occupation is one of the most critical bases in an individual's social standing, life chances and level of material comfort.

Social scientists have used occupation extensively as an indicator of social class because of the finding that individuals in the same occupation tend to experience similar degrees of social advantage or disadvantage, maintain comparable lifestyles, and share similar opportunities in life. Class schemes based on the occupational structure take a number of different forms. Some schemes are largely descriptive in nature - they reflect the shape of the occupational and class structure in society without addressing the relations between social classes. Such models have been favoured by scholars who see stratification as unproblematic and part of the natural social order, such as those working in the functionalist tradition.

Other schemes are more theoretically informed - often drawing on the ideas of Marx or Weber - and concern themselves with explaining the relations between classes in society. 'Relational' class schemes tend to be favoured by sociologists working within conflict paradigms in order to demonstrate the divisions and tensions within society. Erik Olin Wright's theory of class, discussed above, is an example of a relational class scheme, because it seeks to depict the processes of class exploitation from a Marxist perspective. John Goldthorpe's influential work is an example of a relational scheme originally rooted in Weberian ideas of class (see 'Classic Studies 11.2').

Evaluating Goldthorpe's class scheme

As 'Classic Studies 11.2' notes, Goldthorpe's class scheme has been used widely in empirical research. It has been useful in highlighting class-based inequalities, such as those related to health and education, as well as reflecting class-based dimensions in...
The research problem
What is the connection between the jobs we do and our class positions? Is class simply a question of occupation? Do we then move from class to class as we move occupations? If we retrain, move into higher education or become unemployed, does our class position change as well? As sociologists, how can we best carry our research into social class?

Some sociologists have been satisfied with descriptive social class schemes, claiming that they merely reflect social and material inequalities between classes rather than seeking to explain the class processes which give birth to them. With such concerns in mind, British sociologist John Goldthorpe created a scheme for use in empirical research on social mobility. The Goldthorpe class scheme was designed not as a hierarchy but as a representation of the relative nature of the contemporary class structure.

Goldthorpe’s explanation
Goldthorpe’s ideas have been highly influential. Although he now acknowledges that his original theoretical influence on his scheme (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1993), other sociologists have often pointed to the Goldthorpe classification as an example of a neo-Weberian class scheme. This is because Goldthorpe’s original scheme identified class locations on the basis of two main factors: market situation and work situation. An individual’s market situation concerns his or her level of pay, job security, and prospects for advancement; it emphasizes material rewards and general life chances. The work situation, by contrast, focuses on characteristics of control, power, and authority within the occupation. An individual’s work situation is concerned with the degree of autonomy in the workplace and the overall relations of control affecting an employee.

Goldthorpe devised his scheme by evaluating occupation on the basis of their relative market and work situations. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Goldthorpe’s comparative research encompassed social class and occupation known as the CASMIN project (Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Societies). The results of this project are significant, as the resulting classification was incorporated into the UK Office for National Statistics: Own Socio-Economic Classification (ONS-SEC) and is intended to be the basis for a European-wide scheme (Commission 2001). The Goldthorpe/CASMIN and UK ONS-SEC schemes are shown in Table 11.1, alongside the more commonly used sociological terms (on the right-hand side).

Originally encompassing eleven class locations, reduced to eight in the CASMIN research, Goldthorpe’s scheme remains more detailed than many others. Yet in common usage, class locations are still compressed into just three main class strata: a ‘service’ class (classes I and II), an ‘intermediate’ class (classes III and IV), and a ‘working’ class (classes V-VII). Goldthorpe also acknowledges the presence of an elite class of property-owners at the very top of the scheme, but argues that it is such a small segment of society that it is not meaningful as a category in empirical studies.

In his more recent writing, Goldthorpe (2000) has emphasized employment relations within his scheme, rather than the notion of work situation described above. By drawing attention to different types of employment contract, Goldthorpe is able to distinguish between different types of work situations. For example, an employer-employee relationship is characterized by a ‘primary’ contract, in which the employer provides the worker with a position of power and authority. An ‘intermediate’ class location is characterized by an ‘exchange’ relationship, in which the employer provides the worker with a position of control, power, and authority. An ‘intermediate’ class location is characterized by an ‘exchange’ relationship, in which the employer provides the worker with a position of control, power, and authority.

Critical points
An extended evaluation of Goldthorpe’s schema follows, but here we can note two major criticisms. Although his scheme is clearly useful for empirical researchers, it is not as clear that it can tell us much about the position of those social groups, such as students, that fall

Table 11.1 Goldthorpe/CASMIN and UK ONS-SEC social class schemes alongside more commonly used sociological categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goldthorpe/CASMIN schemes</th>
<th>National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification</th>
<th>Common descriptive term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Professional, administrative and managerial employees, higher grade</td>
<td>1 Higher managerial and professional occupations</td>
<td>Salariat (or service class)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Professional, administrative and managerial employees, lower grade; technicians, higher grade</td>
<td>2 Lower managerial and professional occupations</td>
<td>Intersalarial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Routine non-manual employee, higher grade</td>
<td>3 Intermediate occupations</td>
<td>Intermediate white collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Small employer and self-employed workers</td>
<td>4 Employees in small organizations, own account workers</td>
<td>Independent (or petty bourgeoisie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Supervisors of manual workers; technicians, lower grade</td>
<td>5 Lower supervisory and lower technical occupations</td>
<td>Intermediate blue-collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Skilled manual workers</td>
<td>6 Semi-routine occupations</td>
<td>Workman class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Routine non-manual workers, lower grade</td>
<td>7 Routine occupations</td>
<td>Workman class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Semi- and unskilled manual workers</td>
<td>8 Unskilled occupations</td>
<td>Workman class</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Voting patterns, political outlooks and general social attitudes. Yet it is important to note several significant limitations to schemes such as Goldthorpe’s, which should caution us against applying them uncritically.

Occupational class schemes are difficult to apply to the economically inactive, such as the unemployed, students, pensioners and children. Unemployed and retired individuals are often classified on the basis of their previous work activity, although this
11.1 The death of class?

In recent years there has been a vigorous debate within sociology about the usefulness of ‘class’. Some sociologists, such as Ray Pahl, have even questioned whether it is still a useful concept in attempting to understand contemporary societies. Australian academicians Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters have been prominent amongst those who argue that class is no longer the key to understanding contemporary societies. In their book, The Death of Class (1996), they argue that contemporary societies have undergone profound social changes and are no longer to be accurately seen as ‘class societies’.

A time of social change

Pakulski and Waters argue that industrial societies are now undergoing a period of tremendous social change. We are witnessing a period in which the political, social and economic importance of class are in decline. Industrial societies have changed from being organized class societies to a new stage, which Pakulski and Waters call ‘status conventionalism’. They use this term to describe that inequalities, although they remain, are the result of differences in status (prestige) and in the lifestyle and consumption patterns favoured by such status groups. Class as a concept has become an important factor in the status identity and the class community. A study by Bell and Walford’s study of British green (1973) is a key to the past. These changes in turn mean that attempts to explain political and social behaviour by reference to class are also out of date. Class, it seems, is well and truly dead.

Property-ownership

One of the reasons for this huge shift is that there have been important changes in property ownership. Property ownership, it is claimed, is now less restricted. This means that there is an increase in competition amongst firms, since there are more of them, and less opportunity to become a dominant capitaliste. In general, class to a reproducing and pass on its privilege to the next generation of capitalists. Inequality, however, remains, and, where it does arise, is the result of the failure of groups to achieve a high status, not their class position (their position in a division of labour).

Increase in consumer power

These changes have been accompanied by an increase in consumer power. In ever more competitive and diverse markets, firms have to be much more sensitive in meeting the wishes of consumers. There has thus been a shift in the balance of power in advanced industrial societies. What marks out the underprivileged in contemporary society – what Pakulski and Waters refer to as an ‘ascriptively disfranchised’ – is their inability to engage in status.
consumption,' which is to say their inability to buy cars, clothes, houses, holidays and other consumer goods.

For Pakulski and Waters, contemporary societies are stratified, but this stratification is achieved through cultural consumption, not class position in the division of labour. It is a matter of style, taste and status (prestige), not of location in the division of labour.

Processes of globalization

The shift from organized class to status conventionalism is explained as being the result of processes of globalization, changes in the economy, technology and politics. Pakulski and Waters argue that globalization has led to a new international division of labour, in which the 'first world' is increasingly post-industrial – there are simply fewer of the sort of manual working-class occupations which characterized the previous era of organized class society.' At the same time, in a globalized world, nation-states are less self-contained and are less able to govern either their population or market forces than they once were.

Stratification and inequality still exist, but they do so more on a global than a national basis; we see more significant inequalities between different nations than we do within a nation-state.

The political and social implications

These changes have had profound political and social implications. As mentioned above, collective class-based communities have collapsed. In the case of the UK this has occurred as old industries, such as coal-mining, have 'down-sized' and populations have shifted to the more affluent urbanized areas in the south. Greater geographical mobility has led to changes in family structure – single-person households are on the increase in the UK. Pakulski and Waters argue that in the context of greater geographical mobility, the importance of the family as a site of class reproduction (as in Young and Willmott) is now very much in decline.

Nothing but a theory?

John Scott and Tiziana Moro argue for a need to make distinctions between the class position of individuals – their location in a division of labour – and the collective phenomena of social class through which people express a sense of belonging to a group and have a shared sense of identity and values. This last sense of class (a more subjective and collective sense) may or may not exist in a society at a particular time – it will depend on many social, economic and political factors.

It is this last aspect of class that appears to have diminished in recent years. This does not mean that status and the cultural aspects of stratification are now so dominant that the economic aspects of class are of no significance; indeed, mobility studies and inequalities of wealth indicate the opposite. Class is not dead – it is just becoming that bit more complex.

Source: Adapted from Abbott 2001

Contemporary class divisions in the developed world

The question of the upper class

Who is right, Westergaard or Goldthorpe? Is there still a distinctive upper class in the developed societies, founded on ownership of wealth and property? Or should we be talking more of a wider service class, as Goldthorpe suggests? Although Goldthorpe recognizes that a small elite upper class does exist, this is seen as so small that it becomes difficult to draw into representative surveys. On the other hand, for those who argue that an elite upper class is still significant enough to be the focus of research, this is not the same class as the landed aristocracy of estates systems. Instead, it is a capitalist elite whose wealth and power is derived from profit-making in global markets. One way of approaching these issues is to look at how far wealth and income are concentrated in the hands of a few.

Reliable information about the distribution of wealth is difficult to obtain. Some countries keep more accurate statistics than others, but there is always a considerable amount of guesswork involved. The affluent do not usually publicize the full range of their assets; it has often been remarked that we know far more about the poor than we do about the wealthy. What is certain is that wealth is indeed concentrated in the hands of a small minority. In Britain, for example, the top 1 per cent own some 21 per cent of all marketable wealth. The most wealthy 10 per cent of the population has consistently owned 50 per cent or more of the total marketable wealth in the country, while the least wealthy half of the population owns less than 10 per cent of the total wealth (see table 11.2).

Ownership of stocks and bonds is more unequal than holdings of wealth as a whole. The top 1 per cent in the UK own some 75 per cent of privately held corporate shares; the top 5 per cent own over 90 per cent of the total. But there has also been more change in this respect. Around 25 per cent of the population owns shares, which compares with 14 per cent in 1986 – many people bought shares for the first time during the privatization programme of the Conservative government that came to power in 1979.

The increase is even more dramatic when looked at over a longer period, for in 1979 only 5 per cent of the population held shares. Most of these holdings are small (worth less than £1,000 at 1991 prices), and institutional share-ownerships – shares held by companies – are growing faster than individual share-ownerships.

Historically, it has been very difficult to arrive at an overall picture of global wealth distribution because of the problems of data-gathering in some countries. However, a recent study by the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER 2007) covers all the countries of the world and takes in household wealth, shares and other financial assets, as well as land and buildings, making it the most comprehensive global survey of personal wealth ever undertaken. The Helsinki survey found that the richest 1 per cent of the global population owns more than half of global household wealth. It also found that while the richest 10 per cent of adults owned 85 per cent of global wealth, the bottom 50 per cent owned just 1 per cent. Clearly, when compared with a single developed country like the UK, the global pattern of wealth distribution is even more unequal.
reflecting the gross disparity in wealth and power between the industrialized countries and those in the developing world.

The rich do not constitute a homogeneous group. Nor do they form a static category: individuals follow varying trajectories into and out of wealth. Some rich people were born into families of old money – an expression which refers to long-standing wealth that has been passed down through generations. Other affluent individuals are 'self-made', having successfully built up wealth from more humble beginnings. Profiles of the richest members of society vary enormously. Next to members of long-standing affluent families are music and film celebrities, athletes and representatives of the 'new elite' who have made millions through the development and promotion of computers, telecommunications and the Internet. Like poverty, wealth must be regarded in the context of life-cycles. Some individuals become wealthy very quickly, only to lose much or all of it; others may experience a gradual growth or decline in assets over time.

While it is difficult to collect precise information about the assets and lives of the rich, it is possible to trace broad shifts in the composition of the wealthiest segment of society. Some noteworthy trends have arisen in recent years, which we can observe from UK data. First, 'self-made millionaires', like Sir Tulsi Amol, who discussed at the start of this chapter, appear to be making up a greater proportion of the wealthiest individuals. More than 75 per cent of the 1,000 richest Britons in 2007 made their own wealth rather than inheriting it. Second, a small but growing number of women are entering the ranks of the rich. In 1989, only six women were represented among the wealthiest Britons; by 2007 that number had risen to 42. Third, in recent years many of the wealthiest members of society are quite young – in their 20s or 30s. In 2006, there were 17 Britons under the age of 50, who were worth more than £30 million. Fourth, ethnic minorities, particularly those of Asian origin, have been increasing their presence among the super-rich (Sunday Times Rich List 2007). Finally, many of the richest people in Britain – including the richest, Roman Abramovich – were born in the country, but decided to make it their place of residence for a variety of reasons, including the relatively low rates of tax for the super-rich.

Although the composition of the rich is certainly changing, the view that there is no longer a distinguishable upper class is questionable. John Scott (1991) has argued that the upper class today is no longer based on the old-style industrial and finance capitalists. Instead, the upper class today is based on the wealthy, those who own large corporations, or are top managers of large corporations. The rich are in a different position, with senior executives in large corporations and those who own large corporations, or are top managers of large corporations. The rich are in a different position, with senior executives in large corporations and those who own large corporations, or are top managers of large corporations. These rich people are often able to accumulate wealth, and the wealth they accumulate is often concentrated in the hands of the super-rich.

The growing middle class

The 'middle class' covers a broad spectrum of people working in many different occupations, from employees in the service industry to school teachers to medical professionals. Some authors prefer to speak of the 'middle classes' so as to draw attention to the diversity of occupations, status and status, and life chances that characterize its members. According to most observers, the middle class now encompasses the majority of the population in Britain and most other industrialized countries. This is because the proportion of white-collar jobs has risen markedly relative to blue-collar ones over the course of the century.
Members of the middle class, by merit of their educational credentials or technical qualifications, occupy positions that provide them with greater material and cultural advantages than those enjoyed by manual workers. Unlike the working class, members of the middle class can sell their mental and physical labour power in order to earn a living. While this distinction is useful in forming a rough division between the middle and working classes, the dynamic nature of the occupational structure and the possibility of upward and downward social mobility make it difficult to define the boundaries of the middle class with great precision.

The middle class is not internally cohesive and is unlikely to become so, given the diversity of its members and their differing interests (Butler and Seale 1985). It is true that the middle class can be thought of as homogeneous as the working class; nor do its members share a common social background or cultural outlook, as is largely the case with the top layers of the upper class. The 'loose' composition of the middle class is not a new phenomenon, however; it has been an abiding feature of the middle class since its emergence in the early nineteenth century.

Professional, managerial and administrative occupations have among the fastest growing sectors of the middle class. There are several reasons why this is so. The first is related to the importance of large-scale organizations in modern societies.

The spread of bureaucracies has created opportunities and a demand for employees to work within institutional settings. Individuals such as doctors and lawyers, who might have been self-employed in earlier times, now tend to work in institutional environments. Second, the growth of professionals is a reflection of the expanding number of people who work in sectors of the economy where the government plays a major role. The creation of the welfare state led to an enormous growth in many professions involved in carrying out its mandate, such as social workers, teachers and healthcare professionals. Finally, with the deepening of economic and industrial development, there has been an ever-growing demand for the services of experts in the fields of law, finance, accounting, technology and information systems. In this sense, professionals can be seen as both a product of the modern era and a central contributor to its evolution and expansion.

Professionals, managers and higher-level administrators gain their position largely from their possession of credentials — degrees, diplomas and other qualifications. As a whole, they enjoy relatively secure and remunerative careers, and their separation from people in more routine non-manual jobs has probably grown more pronounced in recent years. Some authors have seen professionals and higher white-collar groups as forming a specific class, the 'professional/managerial class' (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979). The degree of division between them and white-collar workers, however, does not seem either deep or clear-cut enough to make such a position defensible.

Other authors have examined the ways in which white-collar professionals join together to maximize their own interests and to secure high levels of material reward and prestige. The case of the medical profession illustrates this point clearly (Parry and Parry 1976). Some groups within the medical profession, such as doctors, have successfully organized themselves to protect their standing in society and to ensure a high level of material reward. Three main dimensions of professionalism have enabled this to happen: entry into the profession is restricted to those who meet a strict set of defined criteria (qualification); a professional association monitors and disciplines the conduct and performance of its members; and it is generally accepted that only members of the profession are qualified to practise medicine. Through such channels, self-governing professional associations are able to exclude unwanted individuals from the profession and to enhance the market position of their own members.

The changing working class

Marx forecast that the working class — people working in manufacturing as blue-collar labour — would become progressively larger and larger. That was the basis for his view that the working class would create the momentum for a revolutionary transformation of society. In fact, the working class has become smaller and smaller. Only about a quarter of a century ago, some 49 per cent of the working population was in blue-collar work. Now, in the developed countries, the figure stands at only about 18 per cent, and the proportion is still falling. Moreover, the conditions under which working-class people are living, and the styles of life they are following, are changing.

The industrialized countries have significant numbers of poor people. However, the majority of individuals working in blue-collar occupations no longer live in poverty. As was mentioned earlier, the income of manual workers has increased considerably since the turn of the century. This rising standard of living is expressed in the increased availability of consumer goods to all classes. About half of blue-collar workers now own their own homes. Cars, washing machines, televisions and telephones are owned by a very high proportion of households.

We examine this issue more closely in chapter 12, Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare.

The phenomenon of working-class affluence suggests yet another possible route towards a more 'middle-class society'. Perhaps as blue-collar workers grow more prosperous, they become middle class. This idea came to be known as the embourgeoisement thesis — simply, the process through which more people become 'bourgeois' or middle class. In the 1950s, when the thesis was first advanced, its supporters argued that many blue-collar workers earning middle-class wages would adopt middle-class values and lifestyles as well. There was a seemingly strong argument that progress within industrial society was having a powerful effect on the shape of social stratification.

In the 1960s, John Goldthorpe and his colleagues in the UK carried out what came to be a well-known study in order to test the embourgeoisement hypothesis. In undertaking the study, they argued that if the thesis was correct, affluent blue-collar employees should be virtually indistinguishable from white-collar employees in terms of their attitudes to work, lifestyle and politics. Based on interviews with workers in the car and chemical industries, the research was published in three volumes. It is often referred to as the Affluent Worker study (Goldthorpe 1968; 9). A total of 229 manual workers were studied, together with 54 white-collar workers for purposes of comparison. Many of the blue-collar workers had migrated to the area in search of well-paid jobs; compared to most other manual workers, they were in fact highly paid and earned more than most lower-level white-collar workers.

Goldthorpe and his colleagues focused on three dimensions of working-class attitudes and found very little support for the embourgeoisement thesis. In terms of economic outlooks and attitudes to work, the authors agreed that many workers had acquired a middle-class standard of living on the basis of their income and ownership of consumer goods. Yet this relative affluence was attained through positions characterized by poor benefits, low chances for promotion and little intrinsic job satisfaction. The authors of the study found that
affluent workers had an instrumental orientation to their work; they saw it as a means to an end: the end of gaining good wages. Their work was mostly repetitive and uninteresting, and they had little direct commitment to it.

Despite levels of affluence comparable to those of white-collar employees, the workers in the study did not associate with white-collar workers in their leisure time, and did not aspire to rise up the class ladder. Goldthorpe and his colleagues found that most socializing was done at home with immediate family members or kin, or with other working-class neighbours. There was little indication that the workers were moving towards middle-class norms and values. In terms of political outlooks, the authors found that there was a negative correlation between working-class affluence and support for the Conservative Party. Supporters of the embourgeoisement thesis had predicted that growing affluence among the working class would weaken traditional support for the Labour Party.

The results of the study, in the eyes of its authors, were clear-cut: the embourgeoisement thesis was false. These workers were not in the process of becoming more middle class. However, Goldthorpe and his colleagues did concede the possibility of some convergence between the lower-middle class and upper-working class on certain points. Affluent workers shared with their white-collar counterparts similar patterns of economic consumption, a privatized home-centred outlook and support for instrumental collectivism (collective action through unions to improve wages and conditions) at the workplace.

No strictly comparable research has been carried out in the intervening years, and it is not clear how far, if the conclusions reached by Goldthorpe et al. were valid at the time, they remain true now. It is generally agreed that the old, traditional working-class communities have tended to become fragmented, or have broken down altogether, with the decline of manufacturing industry and the impact of consumerism. Just how far such fragmentation has proceeded, however, remains open to dispute.

**THINKING CRITICALLY**

Look again at the section on the upper class. Does the existence of a very small upper class support Marx's theory of class or Weber's? Explain your answer fully. Explain how it is theoretically possible for the working class to become generally more affluent, when at the same time, social inequality is increasing.

Is there an underclass?

The term 'underclass' is often used to describe the segment of the population located at the very bottom of the class structure. Members of the underclass have living standards that are significantly lower than the majority of people in society. It is a group characterized by multiple disadvantages. Many are among the long-term unemployed, or drift in and out of jobs. Some are homeless, or have no permanent place in which to live. Members of the underclass may spend long periods of time dependent on state welfare benefits. The underclass is frequently described as 'marginalized' or 'excluded' from the way of life that is maintained by the bulk of the population.

The concept of an underclass is opposed to the 'dangerous classes' of paupers, thieves and vagabonds who refused to work and instead survived on the margins of society as 'social parasites'. In more recent years, the idea of an underclass that is dependent on welfare benefits and bereft of initiative has been similarly influential.

**Background to the underclass debate**

Recent debates over the underclass have been prompted by several important works published by American sociologists about the position of poor blacks living in inner-city areas. In *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), drawing on research in Chicago, William Julius Wilson argued that a substantial black middle-class—white-collar workers and professionals—had emerged over the previous three or four decades in the United States. Not all African-Americans still live in city ghettos, and those who remain are kept there, Wilson maintained, not so much by active discrimination as by economic factors—in other words, by class rather than by race. The old racist barriers are disappearing: blacks are stuck in the ghettos as a result of economic disadvantages.

Charles Murray agreed about the existence of a black underclass in most big cities. According to him (1984), however, African-Americans find themselves at the bottom of society as a result of the very welfare policies that are supposed to help improve their position. This is a reiteration of the 'culture of poverty' thesis, according to which, it is argued, people become dependent on welfare handouts and then have little incentive to find jobs, build solid communities or make stable marriages.

In response to these claims, in the 1990s Wilson repeated and extended his previous arguments, again using research carried out in Chicago. The movement of many whites from the cities to the suburbs, the decline of urban industries and other urban economic problems, he suggested, led to high rates of joblessness among African-American men. Wilson explained the forms of social disintegration to which Murray pointed, including the high proportion of unmarried black mothers, in terms of the shrinking of the available pool of 'marriageable' (employed) men. In more recent work, Wilson examined the role of such social processes in creating spatially concentrated pockets of urban deprivation populated by a so-called 'ghetto poor'. Members of the ghetto poor—predominantly African-American and Hispanic—experience multiple deprivations, from low educational qualifications and standards of health to high levels of criminal victimization. They
periods of time were more committed to the concept of work than those who were employed.

The underclass, the EU and migration
Much debate on the underclass in the United States centres around its ethnic dimension. Increasingly, this is now the case in Europe as well; the tendencies towards economic division and social exclusion now characteristic of America seem to be hardening both in Britain and other countries in Western Europe. The underclass is closely linked to questions of race, ethnicity and migration. In cities such as London, Manchester, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Paris and Naples, there are neighbourhoods marked by severe economic deprivation. Hamburg is Germany’s richest city, as measured by average personal income, and has the highest proportion of millionaires in Germany; it also has the highest proportion of people on welfare and unemployment – 40 per cent above the national average.

The majority of poor and unemployed people in West European countries are native to their countries, but there are also many first- and second-generation immigrants in poverty and trapped in deteriorating city

Global Society 11.1 The creation of a ‘Muslim underclass’ in Germany?

Berlin integration plan attacked

Demonstrators from the large Turkish community in Germany have protested in Berlin outside a summit on integration convened by Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Four Turkish groups are boycotting the meeting, saying a new immigration bill treats Turkish-origin people and other immigrants as “second-class citizens.” The forum will examine ways to improve community relations, including teaching German in minority schools.

About 16 million people with immigrant backgrounds are living in Germany. The BBC’s Trisanna Moore in Berlin says the situation of Germany’s 3.2 million Muslims, most of whom are of Turkish origin, has generated some anxiety. She fears that a lack of job prospects and the language divide risk creating an embittered Muslim underclass. Minister have long been concerned that mosques are springing up in German cities, she reports.

New rules

Chancellor Merkel has invited members of the Muslim community and other immigrant groups to the conference. But several Turkish community groups want the government to change the controversial immigration bill. It stipulates that an immigrant who wants to bring a spouse to

Source: BBC News, 12 July 2007, bbc.co.uk/news
neighbourhoods. Sizeable populations of Turks in Germany, Algerians in France and Albanians in Italy, for example, have grown up in each of these countries. Migrants in search of a better standard of living are often relegated to casual jobs that offer low wages and few career prospects (for example, see the article in 'Global Society 11:1'). Furthermore, migrants' earnings are sent home in order to support family members who have remained behind. The standard of living for recent immigrants can be precariously low.

In cases where family members attempt to join a migrant illegally so that the family can be reunited, the potential for exclusion and marginalization is particularly high. Ineligible for state welfare benefits, migrants lacking official status are unable to draw on support from the state in order to maintain a minimum standard of living. Such individuals are extremely vulnerable, trapped in highly constrained conditions with few channels of recourse in the event of crisis or misfortune.

**THINKING CRITICALLY**

What would be the consequences for the European Union if an underclass consisting of large numbers of immigrants develops within European societies? What are the main differences between the concept of an 'underclass' and that of 'social exclusion' (refer to chapter 12 if necessary)? Which concept best describes the situation of the poorest sections of society?

**Evaluation**

How can we make sense of these contrasting approaches to the underclass? Does sociological research support the idea of a distinct class of disadvantaged people who are united by similar life chances?

The idea of the underclass was introduced from the United States and continues to make the most sense there. In the USA, extremes of rich and poor are more marked than in Western Europe. Particularly where economic and social deprivation converge with racial divisions, groups of the underprivileged tend to find themselves locked out of the wider society. While the concept of the underclass in these circumstances appears useful in the European countries its use is more questionable. There is not the same level of separation between those who live in conditions of marked deprivation and the rest of society.

However, even in the USA, recent studies have suggested that, although the urban poor comprise an immobile stratum, accounts of a 'defeated and disconnected underclass' are exaggerated. Thus, more recent studies of fast-food workers and homeless street vendors have argued that the separations between the urban poor and the rest of society are not as great as scholars of the underclass think (Duncan 1999; Newman 2000).

**Class and lifestyles**

In analysing class location, sociologists have traditionally relied on conventional indicators of class location such as market position, relations to the means of production and occupation. Some recent authors, however, argue that we should evaluate individuals' class location not only or even mainly, in terms of economic and employment, but also in relation to cultural factors such as lifestyle and consumption patterns. According to this approach, our current age is one in which 'symbols' and markers related to consumption are playing an ever greater role in daily life. Individual identities are structured to a greater extent around lifestyle choices - such as how to dress, what to eat, how to care for one's body and where to relax - and less around more traditional class indicators such as employment.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) supported the view that lifestyle choices are an important indicator of class. He argued that economic capital - which consists of material goods such as property, wealth and income - was important, but he argued that it only provided a partial understanding of class. Bourdieu's conception of social class is extremely broad (see Crompton 1993). He identifies four forms of 'capital': social, cultural, class position, of which economic capital is only one; the others are cultural, social and symbolic (Bourdieu 1986).

Class and lifestyles

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Bourdieu argues that individuals increasingly distinguish themselves from others, not according to economic factors, but on the basis of cultural capital - which includes education, appreciation of the arts, consumption and leisure pursuits. People are aided in the process of accumulating cultural capital by the proliferation of 'need merchants' selling goods and services - either symbolic or actual - for consumption within the capitalist system. Advertisers, marketers, fashion designers, style consultants, interior designers, personal trainers, therapists, web designers and many others are all involved in influencing cultural tastes and promoting lifestyle choices among an ever-widening community of consumers.

Also important in Bourdieu's analysis of class is social capital - one's networks of friends and contacts. Bourdieu defined social capital as the resources that individuals or groups gain 'by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (1992). The concept of social capital has become an important tool in contemporary sociology, and Bourdieu's discussion of the concept marked an important step in the current proliferation of the idea, though social capital forms only one aspect of Bourdieu's broader theoretical scheme.

Last, Bourdieu argues that symbolic capital - which includes possession of a good reputation - is a final important indication of social class. The idea of symbolic capital is similar to that of social status.

Each type of capital in Bourdieu's account is related and, to an extent, being in possession of one can help in the pursuit of the others. For example, a businessman who makes a large amount of money (economic capital) might not have particularly fine tastes in the arts, but can pay for his children to attend private schools where these pursuits are encouraged (and so his children gain cultural capital). The businessman's money might lead him to make new contacts with senior people in the business world, and his children will meet the children of other wealthy families, so he, and they, will gain social capital. Similarly someone with a large group of well-connected friends (social capital) might be quickly promoted to a senior position in their company, where she does well, and gains in economic and symbolic capital.

Other scholars have agreed with Bourdieu that class divisions can be linked to distinctive lifestyle and consumption patterns. Thus, speaking of groupings within the middle class, Savage et al. (1992) identify three sectors based on cultural tastes and assets. Professionals in public service, who are high in cultural capital and low in economic capital, tend to pursue healthy, active lifestyles involving exercise, low alcohol consumption and participation in cultural and community activities. Managers and bureaucrats, by contrast, are typified by 'indistinctive' patterns of consumption, which involve average or low levels of exercise, little engagement with cultural activities, and a preference for traditional styles in home furnishings and fashion. The third grouping, the 'postmoderns', pursue a lifestyle that is lacking in any defining principle and may contain elements not traditionally enjoyed by either of the others.

Thus, horse-riding and an interest in classical literature may be accompanied by a fascination with extreme sports like rock-climbing and a love of raves and Electronic Music.
More recently, Brigitte LeRoux and colleagues (2007) have argued that although the concept of social exclusion cannot usefully illuminate cultural divisions, since it is based on a clear and distinct 'us' and 'them' category, between a large mainstream population and a smaller one consisting of marginalized minorities, social class is still central to the organization of cultural tastes and practices. Nonetheless, it is the perception of class used which matters most in attempts to understand cultural practices as structuring forces within society. As LeRoux et al. argue in relation to the UK:

Our findings suggest that class boundaries are being redrawn through the increasing interplay between economic and cultural capital. Those members of the 'service class' who are typical possess graduate level credentials, especially those in lower managerial positions, are more similar to the intermediate classes than they are to the other sections of the professional middle class. Boundaries are also being re-drawn within the working class, where lower supervisory and technical occupations have been downgraded so that they have become similar to those in semi-routine and routine positions. (2007: 22)

In general terms, it would be difficult to dispute that stratification within classes, as well as between classes, has come to depend not only on occupational differences but also on differences in consumption and lifestyle. This is borne out by looking at trends in society as a whole. The rapid expansion of the service economy and the entertainment and leisure industry, for example, reflect an increasing emphasis on consumption within industrialized countries. Modern societies have become consumer societies, geared to the acquisition of material goods. In some respects a consumer society is a 'mass society', where class differences are to a degree overridden; thus people from different class backgrounds may all watch similar television programmes or shop for clothing in the same high street shops. Yet class differences can also become intensified through variations in lifestyle and 'taste' (Bourdieu 1986).

While bearing these shifts in mind, however, it is impossible to ignore the critical role played by economic factors in the reproduction of social inequalities. For many of the part-time, individuals experiencing extreme social and material deprivation are not doing so as part of a lifestyle choice. Rather, their circumstances are constrained by factors relating to the economic and occupational structure (Crompton, 2008).

Gender and stratification

For many years, research on stratification was 'gender-blind'—it was written as though women did not exist, or as though, for purposes of analysing divisions of power, wealth and prestige, women were unimportant and uninteresting. Yet gender itself is one of the most profound examples of stratification. There are no societies in which men do not, in some aspects of social life, have more wealth, status and influence than women.

**THINKING CRITICALLY**

The study described in 'Using your sociological imagination: 11.2' concludes that although the women involved saw class as marginally important to them, actually, it fundamentally shaped their lives. Given the obvious gap between the women's own understandings and that of the sociologist, is this a case of sociologists treating 'ordinary people' as cultural dopes? (Garfinkel 1963)? How could the sociologist in this study go about validating her research findings?

One of the main problems posed by the study of gender and stratification in modern societies sounds simple, but turns out to be difficult to resolve. This is the question of how far we can understand gender inequalities in modern times mainly in terms of class divisions. Inequalities of gender are more deep-rooted historically than class systems: men have superior standing to women even in hunter-gatherer societies, where there are no classes. Yet class divisions are so marked in modern societies that there is no doubt that they 'overlap' substantially with gender inequalities. The material position of most women tends to reflect that of their fathers or husbands; hence, it can be argued that we have to explain gender inequalities mainly in class terms.

**Determining women's class position**

The view that class inequalities largely govern gender stratification was often an unstated assumption until quite recently. However, feminist critiques and the undeniable changes in women's economic role in many Western societies have broken this issue open for debate. The 'conventional position' in class analysis was that the paid work of women is relatively insignificant compared to that of men, and that therefore women can be
regarded as being in the same class as their husbands (Goldthorpe 1983). According to Goldthorpe, whose own class scheme was originally predicated on this argument, this is not a view based on an ideology of sexism. On the contrary, it recognizes the subordinate position in which most women find themselves in the labour force. Women are more likely to have part-time jobs than men, and tend to have more intermittent experience of paid employment because they may choose to withdraw for lengthy periods to bear and care for children.

Since the majority of women have traditionally been in a position of economic dependence on their husbands, it follows that their class position is most often governed by the husband's class situation.

Goldthorpe's argument has been criticized in several ways. First, in a substantial proportion of households, the income of women is essential to maintaining the family's economic position and mode of life. In these circumstances women's paid employment in some part determines the class position of households. Second, a wife's occupation may sometimes set the standard of the position of the family as a whole. Even where a woman earns less than her husband, her occupation may still be the 'lead' factor in influencing the class of her husband. This could be the case, for example, if the husband is an unskilled or semi-skilled blue-collar worker and the wife, say, the manager of a shop. Third, where 'cross-class' households exist - in which the work of the husband is in a different category from that of the wife - there may be some purposes for which it is more realistic to treat men and women, even within the same households, as being in different class positions. Fourth, the proportion of households in which women are the sole breadwinners is increasing. The growing numbers of lone mothers and childless working women are testament to this fact. Such women are by definition the determining influence on the class position of her own household except in cases where alimony payments put a woman on the same economic level as her ex-husband (Stanworth 1984; Walby 1985).

Goldthorpe and others have defended the conventional position, yet some important changes have also been incorporated into his scheme. For research purposes, the partner of the higher class can be used to classify a household, whether that person be a man or a woman. Rather than classification based on the 'male breadwinner', household classification is now determined by the 'dominant breadwinner'. Furthermore, class III in Goldthorpe's scheme has been divided into two subcategories to reflect the preponderance of women in low-level white-collar work (see page 445). When the scheme is applied to women, class IIb (non-manual workers in sales and services) is treated as class VII. This is seen as a more accurate representation of the position of unskilled and semi-skilled women in the labour market.

Beyond the household?

Developing the debate over the assignment of class positions, some authors have suggested that the class position of an individual should be determined without reference to the household. Social class, in other words, would be assessed from occupation independently for each individual, without specific reference to that person's domestic circumstances. This approach was taken, for example, in the work of Gordon Marshall and his colleagues in a study of the class system of the UK (Marshall 1988).

Such a perspective, however, also has its difficulties. It leaves on one side those who are not in paid employment, including not only full-time housewives, but also retired people and the unemployed. The latter two groups can be categorized in terms of the last major class system of the UK (Marshall 1988).

The impact of women's employment on class divisions

The entry of women into paid employment has had a significant impact on household incomes. But this impact has been experienced unevenly and may be leading to an accentuation of class divisions between households. A growing number of women are moving into professional and managerial positions and earning high salaries. This is contributing to a polarization between high-income 'dual-earner households', on the one hand, and 'single-earner' or 'no-earner' households on the other.

Research has shown that high-earning women tend to have high-earning partners, and that the wives of men in professional and managerial occupations have higher earnings than other employed female partners. Marriage tends to produce partnerships where both individuals are relatively privileged or disadvantaged in terms of occupational attainment (Bonney 1992).

The impact of such dual-earner partnerships is heightened by the fact that the average childbirth age is rising, particularly among professional women. The growing number of dual- and multi-childless couples is helping to fuel the widening gap between the highest and lowest paid households.

Social mobility

In studying stratification, we have to consider not only the differences between economic positions or occupations, but also what happens to the individuals who occupy them. The term social mobility refers to the movement of individuals and groups between different socio-economic positions. Vertical mobility means movement up or down the socio-economic scale.

Those who gain in property, income or status are said to be upwardly mobile - like Sir Gulum Noon whose life history was summarized at the start of this chapter - whereas those who move in the opposite direction are downwardly mobile. In modern societies there is also a great deal of lateral mobility, which refers to geographical movement between neighbourhoods, towns or regions. Vertical and lateral mobility are often combined. For example, someone working in a company in one city might be promoted to a higher position in a branch of the firm located in another town, or even in a different country.

There are two ways of studying social mobility. First, we can look at individuals' own careers - how far they move up or down the social scale in the course of their working lives. This is usually called intragenerational mobility. Alternatively, we can analyse how far children enter the same type of occupation as their parents or grandparents. Mobility across the generations is called intergenerational mobility.

THINKING CRITUICALLY

Many people's image of nineteenth-century industrial societies is one of pollution, grimy factories, poor working conditions and mass poverty. In contrast, post-industrial societies are...dominated by office-based work, middle-class occupations and information technologies. Explain how it is possible for inequality to be increasing in the post-industrial societies, which appear to provide much better working conditions for a majority of their population.

Comparative mobility studies

The amount of vertical mobility in a society is a major index of the degree of its 'openness', indicating how far talented individuals born into lower strata can move up the socio-economic ladder. In this respect,
Global Society 11.2 Is inequality declining in class-based societies?

There is some evidence that, at least until recently, the class systems in mature capitalist societies became increasingly open to movement between classes, thereby reducing the level of inequality. In 1955, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets proposed a hypothesis that has since been called the Kuznets Curve: a formula showing that inequality increases during the early stages of capitalist development, then declines, and eventually stabilizes at a relatively low level (Kuznets 1955: see figure 11.1).

Studies of European countries, the United States, and Canada suggested that inequality peaked in these places before the Second World War, declined through the 1950s and remained roughly the same through the 1970s (Berger 1964; Nielsen 1964). Lowered post-war inequality was due in part to economic expansion in industrial societies, which created opportunities for people at the bottom to move up, and also to government health insurance, welfare and other programmes which aimed at reducing inequality. However, Kuznets's prediction may well turn out to apply only to industrial societies. The emergence of post-industrial society has brought with it an increase in inequality in many developed nations since the 1970s (see chapter 12), which calls into question Kuznets's theory.

Figure 11.1 The Kuznets Curve

Source: Nielsen 1994

Social mobility is an important political issue, particularly in states committed to the liberal vision of equality of opportunity for all citizens. How 'open' are the industrialized countries in terms of social mobility?

Studies of social mobility have been carried on over a period of more than 50 years and frequently involve international comparisons. An important early study was conducted by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan (1967) in America. Their investigation remains the most detailed investigation of social mobility yet carried out in any single country, though like most other studies of mobility, all the subjects were men, which reinforces the point made earlier about the lack of gender balance in this field. Blau and Duncan collected information on a national sample of 20,000 males. They concluded that there was much vertical mobility in the United States, but that nearly all of this was between occupational positions quite close to one another. 'Long-range' mobility was found to be rare. Although downward movement did occur, both within the careers of individuals and inter-generationally, it was much less common than upward mobility. The reason for this is that white-collar and professional jobs have grown much more rapidly than blue-collar ones, a shift that created openings for sons of blue-collar workers to move into white-collar positions. Blau and Duncan emphasized the importance of education and training on an individual's chances for success. In their view, upward social mobility is generally characteristic of industrial societies as a whole and contributes to social stability and integration.

Perhaps the most celebrated international study of social mobility was that carried out by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1959). They analysed data from nine industrialized societies - Britain, France, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Italy and the United States, concentrating on mobility of men from blue-collar to white-collar work. Contrary to their expectations, they discovered no evidence that the United States was more open than the European societies. Total vertical mobility across the blue-collar/white-collar line was 30 per cent in the United States, with the other societies varying between 27 and 31 per cent. Lipset and Bendix concluded that all the industrialized countries were experiencing similar changes in respect of the expansion of white-collar jobs. This led to an 'upward surge of mobility' of comparable dimensions in all of them. Others have questioned their findings, arguing that significant differences between countries are 'oud if more attention is given to downward mobility - and if long-range mobility is also brought into consideration (Heath 1981; Grusky and Hauser 1984).

Most studies of social mobility, such as the ones described here, have focused upon 'objective' dimensions of mobility - that is to say, how much mobility exists, in which directions and for what parts of the population. Gordon Marshall and David Pith (1999) took a different approach in their comparative study of social mobility, investigating people's 'subjective' feelings about changing class positions. The authors designed their research in response to the worry that the term 'unsubstantiated speculation' among sociologists about the likely effects
of social mobility on individuals' sense of well-being. While some argue that social mobility produces a sense of disequilibrium and isolation, others have taken a more optimistic view, suggesting that a gradual process of adaptation to a new class inevitability is possible.

Using survey data from ten countries—Europe, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, the USA and the UK—Marshall and Firth examined whether class mobility was linked to a heightened sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with aspects of everyday life such as family, community, work, income and politics. On the whole, they found little evidence of an association between respondents' class experiences and their overall life satisfaction. This was as true for individuals who had moved from working-class origins to middle-class positions as it was for those who had been downwardly mobile.

**Downward mobility**

Although downward mobility is less common than upward mobility, it is still a widespread phenomenon. Downward intergenerational mobility is also common. Mobility of this type is quite often associated with psychological problems and anxieties, where individuals become unable to sustain the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. Redundancy is another of the main sources of downward mobility. Middle-aged people who lose their jobs, for example, either find it hard to gain new employment at all, or can only obtain work at a lower level of income than before.

Thus far, there have been very few studies of downward mobility in the UK. It is probably, however, that downward mobility, in intergenerational terms, is on the increase in Britain as it is in the United States. In the USA, there have been several studies of the phenomenon. Over the 1980s and early 1990s, for the first time since the Second World War, there was a general downturn in the average real earnings (earnings after adjusting for inflation) of people in middle-level white-collar jobs in the USA. Thus, even if such jobs continue to expand relative to others, they may not support the lifestyle aspirations they once did.

Corporate restructuring and "downsizing" are the main reasons why these changes are happening. In the face of increasing global competition, many companies have trimmed their workforces. White-collar as well as full-time blue-collar jobs have been lost, to be replaced by poorly paid, part-time occupations. Studies have shown that in the USA downward mobility is particularly common among divorced or separated women with children. Women who enjoyed a moderately comfortable middle-class way of life when they were married often find themselves living "hand-to-mouth" after a divorce. In many cases, alimony payments are meagre or non-existent; women attempting to juggle work, childcare and domestic responsibilities find it difficult to make ends meet (Schwartz and Vogel 1992).

**Social mobility in Britain**

Overall levels of mobility have been extensively studied in Britain over the post-war period and there is a wealth of empirical evidence and research studies on the British case. For this reason, we will look at the UK evidence in this section, though, again, until very recently virtually all this research has concentrated on the experience of men.

One important early study was directed by David Glass (1954). Glass's work analysed intergenerational mobility for a longish period up to the 1950s. His findings corresponded to those noted above in respect of international data (around 30 per cent mobility from blue-collar to white-collar jobs). Glass's research was in fact widely drawn on by those making international comparisons. On the whole, he concluded that Britain was not a particularly "open" society. While a good deal of mobility occurred, most of this was short range. Upward mobility was much more common than downward mobility, and was mostly concentrated at the middle levels of the class structure. People right at the bottom tended to stay there: almost 50 per cent of sons of workers in professional and managerial jobs were themselves in similar occupations. Glass also found a high degree of "self-recruitment" of this sort into elite positions within society.

Another important piece of research, known as the Oxford Mobility Study, was carried out by John Goldthorpe and his colleagues, based on the findings from a 1972 survey (Goldthorpe et al. 1968). They sought to investigate how far patterns of social mobility had altered since the time of Glass's work, and concluded that the overall level of mobility of men was in fact higher than in the previous period, with rather more long-range movement being noted. The main reason for this, however, was once again not that the occupational system had become more egalitarian. Rather, the origin of the changes was the continued acceleration in the growth of higher white-collar jobs relative to blue-collar ones. The researchers found that two-thirds of the sons of unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers were themselves in manual occupations. About 30 per cent of professionals and managers were of working-class origins, while some 4 per cent of men in blue-collar work were from professional or managerial backgrounds.

Despite finding evidence of higher rates of absolute social mobility, the Oxford Mobility Study concluded that the relative chances for mobility among different segments of the population in Britain remained highly unequal and that inequalities of opportunity remained squarely grounded within the class structure.

The original Oxford Mobility Study was updated on the basis of new material collected about ten years later (Goldthorpe and Payne 1980). The major findings of the earlier work were corroborated, but some further developments were found. The chances of men from blue-collar backgrounds getting professional or managerial jobs, for example, had increased. Once again, this was traced to changes in the occupational structure, producing a reduction of blue-collar occupations relative to higher white-collar jobs.

Goldthorpe et al. produced results in the 1980s which largely corroborated the findings of Goldthorpe and others. In the Essex Mobility Study, the authors found that a third of people in higher white-collar or professional jobs were from blue-collar backgrounds. Findings such as these demonstrate a substantial amount of fluidity in British society; for many people, it is indeed possible to move up the social hierarchy, in terms of both intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. Yet the scales are still biased against women whose mobility chances are hampered by their over-representation in routine non-manual jobs. The fluid character of modern society derives mostly from its propensity to upgrade occupations. Marshall (1988: 138) and his co-workers concluded: "More 'room at the top' has not been accompanied by greater equality in the opportunities to get there." However, one should bear in mind a point made earlier: mobility is a long-term process, and if the society is becoming more 'open', the full effects will not be seen for a generation.

However, a study by Jo Blanden et al. (2005) at the London School of Economics found a reversal of this process. They compared intergenerational mobility in Britain between two groups, the first all born in March 1968 and the second in April 1970. Even though these groups are only 12 years different in age, the study documented a sharp fall in intergenerational mobility of economic status between them. It was found that the economic status of the group born in 1970 was much more strongly connected to the economic status of their parents than the group born in 1958. The authors suggested that one of the reasons...
for the fall in intergenerational mobility from the earlier to the later groups was that the rise in education attainment from the late 1970s onwards benefited children of the wealthy more than children of the less well-off.

In a more recent article, Jackson and Goldthorpe (2007) studied intergenerational social class mobility in the UK by comparing previous and more recent datasets. They found no evidence that intergenerational mobility was falling in an absolute sense, with relative social mobility rates for both men and women remaining fairly constant, but with some indication of a decline in long-range mobility. However, they found a generally less favourable balance between downward and upward mobility emerging for men, which is the product of structural class change. They conclude that there can be no return to the rising rates of upward mobility experienced in the mid-twentieth century.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Is social mobility really important in modern societies? If intergenerational social mobility has fallen, does it matter? What social consequences are likely to follow from falling levels of social mobility? What can governments do to promote upward social mobility?

Gender and social mobility

Although so much research into social mobility has focused on men, in recent years more attention has begun to be paid to patterns of mobility among women. At a time when girls are 'outperforming' boys in school and females are outnumbering males in higher education, it is tempting to conclude that long-standing gender inequalities in society may be relaxing their hold. Has the occupational structure become more 'open' to women, or are their mobility chances still guided largely by family and social background?

An important cohort study funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) published as, Twenty-Something in the 1990s (Byrner et al. 1997) traced the lives of 9,000 Britons born during the same week in 1970. In 1996, at the age of 26, it was found that for both men and women, family background and class of origin remained powerful influences. The study concluded that the young people who coped best with the transition to adulthood were those who had obtained a better education, postponed marriage and child rearing, and had fathers in professional occupations. Those who had come from disadvantaged backgrounds had a greater tendency to remain there.

The study found that on the whole, women today are experiencing much greater opportunity than their counterparts in the previous generation. Middle-class women have benefited the most from the shifts mentioned above: they were just as likely as their male peers to go on to university and to move into well-paid jobs on graduation. This trend towards greater equality was also reflected in women’s heightened confidence and sense of self-esteem, compared with a similar cohort of women born just twelve years earlier. As table 11.3 shows, women are now moving into some of the high-status positions in British society, as they are in many other developed countries, though not in particularly large numbers. One way of expressing this change is to suggest that the 'glass ceiling' for women has certainly been cracked, but as yet it has not been completely broken.

Women’s chances of entering a good career are improving, but two major obstacles remain. Male managers and employers still discriminate against women applicants. They do so at least partly because of their belief that ‘women are not really interested in careers’ and they are likely to leave the workforce when they begin a family.

Table 11.3 Percentage of women in Britain’s top jobs, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation/Role</th>
<th>Occupation/Role</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MP (House of Commons)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSP (Holyrood, Scottish Parliament)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEP (Strasbourg, European Parliament)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MWA (Cerdd, Welsh Assembly)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority councillor</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Having children does indeed still have a very substantial effect on the career chances of women. This is less because they are interested in a career than because they are often effectively forced to choose between advancement at work and having children. Men are rarely willing to share full responsibility for domestic work and childcare. Although many more women than men before are organizing their domestic lives in order to pursue a career, there are still major barriers in their way.

A meritocratic Britain?

Peter Saunders (1990, 1996) has been one of the most vocal critics of the British tradition of social mobility research encompassing studies such as those done by Glass and Goldthorpe. According to Saunders, Britain is a true meritocracy because rewards go naturally to those who are best able to 'perform' and achieve. In his view, ability and effort are the key factors in occupational success, not class background. Saunders uses empirical data from the National Child Development Study to show that children who are bright and hard-working will succeed regardless of the social advantages or disadvantages they may experience. In his estimation, Britain has an unequal society, but it is a fair one. Such a conclusion may well be a widely held assumption amongst the populations of industrialized nations.

In response to such claims, Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe (1999) criticize Saunders on both theoretical and methodological grounds. They accuse Saunders of introducing biases into his analysis of the survey data, such as excluding respondents who were unemployed. Breen and Goldthorpe provide an alternative analysis of the same data used by Saunders and produce radically different findings, which substantiate their own argument that class barriers are important to social mobility. They conclude that individual merit is certainly a contributing factor in determining individuals’ class positions, but that ‘class of origin’ remains a powerful influence. According to Breen and Goldthorpe, children from disadvantaged backgrounds must show more merit than those who are advantaged to acquire similar class positions.

A more recent international, comparative study of inequality and social mobility by Dan Andrews and Andrew Leigh (2007) also takes issue with Saunders’s claims about ‘fairness’. Their empirical survey used occupational data on men aged 25–54 in 16 countries around the world (excluding the UK), concentrating on the comparative earnings of fathers and their sons. Their main conclusion was: ‘sons who grow up in more unequal societies in the 1970s were less likely to have experienced social mobility by 1997’.

In unequal societies around the world, there is less social
Summary points

1. Social stratification refers to the division of society into layers or strata. When we talk of social stratification, we draw attention to the unequal positions occupied by individuals in society. Analyses of stratification have traditionally been written from a male point of view. This is partly because of the assumption that gender inequalities reflect class differences; this assumption is highly questionable. Gender influences stratification in modern societies to some degree independently of class.

2. Four major types of stratification system can be identified: slavery, caste, estate, and class. Whereas the first three depend on legal or religiously sanctioned inequalities, class divisions are not "officially" recognized, but stem from economic factors affecting the material circumstances of people's lives.

3. The most prominent and influential theories of stratification are those developed by Marx and Weber. Marx placed primary emphasis on class, which he saw as an objectively given characteristic of the economic structure of society. He saw a fundamental split between the owners of capital and the workers who do not own capital. Weber accepted a similar view, but distinguished two other aspects of stratification—status and party. Status refers to the esteem or "social honour" given to individuals or groups; party refers to the active mobilization of groups to secure definite ends.

4. Occupation is frequently used as an indicator of social class. Individuals in the same occupation tend to experience similar life chances. Sociologists have traditionally used occupational class schemes to map the class structure of society. Class schemes are valuable for tracing broad class-based inequalities and patterns, but are limited in other ways. For example, they are difficult to apply to the economically inactive and do not reflect the importance of property-ownership and wealth.

5. Most people in the developed societies are more affluent today than was the case several generations ago, yet wealth remains highly concentrated in a relatively small number of hands. The upper class consists of a small minority of people who have both wealth and power, and the chance of passing on their privileges to the next generation, though the rich are a diverse and changing group with a large number of "self-made" millionaires.

6. The middle class is composed broadly of those working in white-collar occupations, such as teachers, medical professionals and employees in the service industries. In most industrialized countries, the middle class now encompasses the majority of the population, as professional, managerial and administrative occupations have grown.

7. The working class is composed of those in blue-collar or manual occupations. The working class shrank significantly during the twentieth century, with the decline in manufacturing industry, though members of the working class are more affluent than they were 100 years ago.

8. The underclass is said to be a segment of the population that lives in severely disadvantaged conditions at the margins of society. The idea of the underclass was first developed in the United States, and though the notion of the underclass has been applied elsewhere, the concept is perhaps more useful in the US context. Even in the USA, it is a highly controversial concept.

9. Some authors have argued that cultural factors, such as lifestyle and consumption patterns, are important influences on class position, with individual identities now more structured around lifestyle choices than they are around traditional class indicators such as occupation.

10. In the study of social mobility, a distinction is made between intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. The former refers to movement up or down the social scale within an individual's working life. The latter concerns movement across the generations. Social mobility is mostly of limited range. Most people remain close to the level of the families from which they came, although the expansion of white-collar jobs has provided the opportunity for considerable short-range upward mobility. As more women have entered paid employment the glass ceiling has been cracked and women have moved into high status positions, though not in equal numbers to men.
Further reading

A good place to take your studies further is with Wendy Bottero's *Stratification: Social Division and Inequality* (London: Routledge, 2004), which explores social stratification through examples of personal choices and lifestyles. Then, Rosemary Crompton's *Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Polity, 2008) is an excellent book written by an expert in the field, which does exactly what it says in the title.

Moving beyond introductions to current debates, Mike Savage's *Class Analysis and Social Transformation* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000) brings class debates into contact with recent theories of individualization (in the work of Beck and Giddens), providing a fresh interpretation of the evidence. Similarly innovative is Fiona Devine, Mike Savage, John Scott and Rosemary Crompton's *Rethinking Class: Cultures, Identities and Lifestyles* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), which is an edited collection of chapters focusing on the connections between class analysis and culture.


Internet links

Social Inequality and Classes – many useful links from Sociosite at the University of Amsterdam:
[www.sociosite.net/topics/inequality.php#CLASS](http://www.sociosite.net/topics/inequality.php#CLASS)

Explorations in Social Inequality – lots of resources, mainly American, based at Trinity University, San Antonio, USA;
[www.trinity.edu/mkearl/strat.html](http://www.trinity.edu/mkearl/strat.html)

Marxists Internet Archive – exactly what it says; all things Marx and Marxism;
[www.marxists.org/](http://www.marxists.org/)

The Progress on Nations 2000 Unicef Report – material on global inequalities;
[www.unicef.org/po00/](http://www.unicef.org/po00/)

ESRC Society Today – Factsheets on inequality and social mobility in the UK;
[www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/facts/index24.aspx](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/facts/index24.aspx)