



# The Working Class, Middle Class, Assimilation and Convergence

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# **The Working Class, Middle Class, Assimilation and Convergence**

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Looking back over the twentieth century, historians and sociologists distinguish the decades before the Second World War (1939-1945) from the decades after it. Finer distinctions are then drawn including reference to a post-war period of prosperity characterised by a long economic boom between 1951 and 1973. Britain emerged out of a period of austerity after the war only very slowly although it was a period of rebuilding cities and establishing the Welfare State and National Health Service (Hennessy 2007, Kynaston 2008). As the 1950s unfolded, however, unemployment remained low while incomes grew; standards of living started to improve as home ownership and household consumption increased; and cultural norms and practices began to change with the rise of popular music and youth cultures. The decade saw the Conservative Party win three elections in a row in 1951, 1955 and 1959. It seemed that the Labour Party was in permanent decline and political commentators linked declining support for Labour to the economic and social changes of the times. It was a seemingly quiet decade for ordinary people albeit one of considerable change (Kynaston 2010, 2013, 2014, Pearson 2016). This was the context in which *Affluence and the British Class Structure* was published by John H. Goldthorpe and David Lockwood in *The Sociological Review* in 1963. (1) It was to become a classic position paper, laying out the territory for what became the most famous sociological study of its time, *The Affluent Worker Study*, which was published in three volumes later in the decade (Goldthorpe et al. 1968a, 1968b, 1969).

Turning away from discussion on the upgrading of the occupational structure, the decline in inequalities in wealth and income and the increase in intergenerational social mobility, Goldthorpe and Lockwood focused on working-class affluence. The embourgeoisement thesis implied that a now prosperous working class was losing its identity and becoming 'socially indistinguishable' from sections of the middle class 'who were previously their social superiors' (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 134). The purpose of their paper was to engage in more 'systematic thinking' which would 'indicate some of the directions which research could most usefully take' (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 135). They argued that members of the working class were experiencing important changes in their everyday lives. They were not simply being assimilated into the middle class, however, instead there was a convergence between the middle and working class. Sections of the middle class were adjusting too. In this paper, I place the original article in its wider intellectual context, namely the blossoming of Sociology in the 1950s. I assess its impact on Sociology which was enormous as the discipline expanded in tandem with higher education in Britain (Husbands 2014). Finally, I reflect on its contemporary sociological significance. The current climate demands that sociologists consider how class inequalities have become more extreme and rigid once again, especially at the top and bottom of the class structure. Even so, the boundary between the middle class and working class has certainly changed along the lines predicted by Goldthorpe and Lockwood. Remembering the hierarchy between the two classes of yesteryear makes for imperative reading today.

## **Intellectual context**

It is important to place Goldthorpe and Lockwood's article in the context of the development of British Sociology in the opening decade of the twentieth century. Key events included the establishment of the first professional association for British sociologists (The Sociological Society), Britain's first professional journal (The Sociological Review) and the first British Chair in Sociology (at the London School of Economics) (Scott and Bromley 2013: 2). The topic of class – specifically the poverty of working-class life – was of paramount importance. In the nineteenth century, there were important ethnographic studies of the conditions of the working classes in big cities like Manchester by Engels in the 1840s and 1850s and Mayhew in London in the 1850s and 1860s. Booth's (1901) great survey of poverty in London described the miserable working and living conditions of members of the working class and its effects on morale. So too did Rowntree's survey of poverty which collected household budget data to examine the spending and savings habits of ordinary working and nonworking people (Platt 2014). There was a strong materialist focus on the economic conditions of the poor even though this focus was not inspired by Karl Marx. Although Marxism was highly influential in German and French social thought, it was less influential in Britain during this period. The focus on poverty and class came out of the rise of Labourism and Socialism in Britain from the 1880s, the foundation of the Fabian Society in 1884 (Fabians later established the LSE) and the Independent Labour Party in 1893 (Scott and Bromley 2013: 8).

Against this background, discussing working-class affluence 60 years later is astonishing. Goldthorpe and Lockwood began their famous collaboration at the Department of Applied Economics at the University of Cambridge in the early 1960s. Lockwood was already a towering figure in Sociology (Halsey 2004). (2) He had published his PhD as *The Blackcoated Worker: A study in Class Consciousness* in 1958 (Lockwood 1958/1989). Rejecting the Marxian view that clerks suffered from false consciousness because they did not align themselves with the working class, Lockwood argued that it was important to understand a person's class position in terms of market situation (income, security and career possibilities), work situation (the set of social relationships in which the individual is involved at work by virtue of their position in the division of labour) and status position (the position of the individual in the hierarchy of prestige in society at large). In this respect, they have a different position from manual workers. The focus on status came, of course, from the German sociologist, Max Weber (1970, 1978). These theoretical considerations can be seen in the 'note on concepts and terminology' section at the end of the paper. Goldthorpe and Lockwood stated, 'our interest is in the nature and causes of change in the position of the manual wage-earner that involves simultaneously a weakening of 'communal forms' of class consciousness and class behaviour and (possibly) a modification of the predominant lines of 'conventional' status group stratification within the local community' (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 157).

Finally, the flowering of post-war Sociology and the publications of other classic studies of British Sociology in the 1950s and 1960s was the intellectual context in which Goldthorpe and Lockwood were writing. In *The Sociological Review* paper, for example, Goldthorpe and Lockwood took aim at Zweig's *The Worker in an Affluent Society* (1961) which was the strongest statement of the embourgeoisement thesis. They were critical of his neglect of the 'economic, normative and relational' aspects of class. They noted that the 'division between manual and non-manual workers and their families has proved to be one of the most salient' with regard to housing, relations with neighbours, friendship groups and formal involvement in associations (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 142). Here they drew on evidence from community studies including Stacey (1960) and Young and Willmott (1957). Thinking about how working-class lifestyles were becoming more home and family-centred, they noted how

the importance of 'keeping yourself to yourself' and being 'respectable' rather than 'rough' were always important aspects of working-class lifestyles (Jennings 1962, Mogeys 1956). Highly critical of 'poll-type interviews' asking people what class they belonged to, they turned to Bott's (1957) study of family and social networks and the importance of understanding the meaning of class in relation to wider images of society. Goldthorpe and Lockwood's thinking, therefore, was greatly influenced by 'the golden moment of community studies' (Crow 2014). They also drew extensively on American community and other qualitative studies (Chinoy 1955 for example) as well as new research on electoral behaviour in Britain (Butler and Rose 1960). (3)

### **Impact on the field**

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know this paper was one of a series of position papers that appeared from 1963 onwards. They were presented at the annual conference of the British Sociological Association which was established in 1951. The first BSA conference to be held outside London, at the University of Sussex, Brighton, in 1962 had as its theme 'Problems of the Affluent Society' where the authors presented papers (Platt 2014). These papers were published in *The Sociological Review* (then based at Keele University) (Lockwood 1966), *British Journal of Sociology* (established in association with the LSE in 1950) (Goldthorpe 1966) and *Sociology*, the first journal of the BSA which was set up in 1967 (Goldthorpe et al. 1967). All of these papers kept interest in the project alive as the empirical work was being done. The research project began in 1962 and involved Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt who became the junior authors of the three volumes. They went on to become professors at Edinburgh and Sussex respectively. The research team employed various research assistants who also became well-known sociologists including Michael Rose, who taught at Bath, and Rosemary Crompton, who worked at East Anglia, Kent, Leicester and City Universities. (5) *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Volume 1) and *The Affluent Worker, Political Attitudes and Behaviour* (Volume 2) were published in 1968 while *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Volume 3) was published in 1969. The first volume was a by-product of Goldthorpe and Lockwood's interest in orientations to work while the second volume was of wider public interest on the politics of the day. The third volume focused on their central concern about the position of the affluent worker in the class structure (Goldthorpe et al. 1969: vii).

The final volume appeared five years after the period of data collection was complete. The late 1960s witnessed a massive expansion in higher education following the Robbins Report. Sociology was a hugely popular undergraduate degree at many of the new universities such as Essex and Warwick (Husbands 2014). Interest in the Affluent Worker Study was enormous. The political climate in which the volumes were published was rather different. In Britain, the Labour Party had been elected to power in 1964 and then again in 1966. It was a period of student revolt in Europe (Paris), the US (California) and Britain (at the LSE and notably Essex). The debate on the working class no longer focused on embourgeoisement and the decline of class consciousness but the rise of radicalism and growth of class consciousness (especially for students and staff of a Marxist hue). Against the background of growing industrial militancy, Goldthorpe et al.'s (1968a) first volume on industrial attitudes and behaviour generated considerable interest. First, there was much debate on the 'social correlates' of workers' instrumental orientations to work and trade unionism in 'industrial sociology', a topic which was invariably compulsory on undergraduate degree programmes (Brown 1992). Beynon's (1973) study of car workers at the Ford factory in Merseyside was critical of this idea of instrumentalism. Trade unionism, for example, was not just a means to

an end (a vehicle to secure higher wages) but an end (commitment to industrial solidarity) in itself. Early industrial sociology was closely intertwined with the study of class so the debates on the virtues of Marx and Weber were played out in this sub-discipline too (Devine 1992, Edwards 2014: 497).

The second area of debate focused on class imagery. Goldthorpe and Lockwood were highly dismissive of 'class psychology' where people were asked to place themselves in a class. In The Sociological Review paper, following Bott (1957), they called for a broader focus on class imagery looking at perceptions of society, general values and specific attitudes. They ventured to suggest that individuals occupying comparable positions within the social hierarchy could be expected to have a broadly similar social imagery. They described ideal-type working-class and middle-class perspectives (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 146-7). The concept of working-class images of society was subsequently developed by Lockwood (1966) in another position paper that appeared in The Sociological Review. The idea that the working class now held a pecuniary or money (rather than power-based) model of the class structure was developed in chapter 5 of the final volume of the study (Goldthorpe et al. 1969). There was extensive interest in the idea that members of the working class hold clear and consistent images of the class structure and their place within it. All of the contributors to Bulmer's edited collection, Working-Class Images of Society (1975) cast doubt on there being a neat fit between people's milieu and their social perspectives. The theory was too deterministic and did not stand up to empirical scrutiny. Instead, a consensus emerged around working-class ambivalence as a more accurate description of class beliefs, values and attitudes (Mann 1973, Newby 1977, Parkin 1972).

By the late 1970s, the debates and research generated by the Affluent Worker Study had run their course. Talk of working-class affluence fell away as the long boom ended with the oil crisis in 1973. Economic recessions, increasing unemployment, growing inequalities of income and wealth and a weariness with industrial militancy saw the Labour Government defeated by the Conservative Party led by Margaret Thatcher in 1979. The 1980s was a very different decade with the collapse of manufacturing and the defeat of the trade unions (Edwards 2003). Lockwood returned to his theoretical interests which eventually led to the publication of Solidarity and Schism (1992). At Nuffield, Goldthorpe embarked on a new programme of work on social mobility which was published in 1980 (Goldthorpe et al. 1980, 1987). This research now took centre stage. There was a widespread consensus on the key findings: namely, that there had been considerable upward and limited downward social mobility (absolute mobility) from the 1940s onwards, although the chances of a son of working-class origin moving into a middle class destination were still not as good as those of his middle-class counterpart (relative mobility). There were mixed views about the class schema devised by Goldthorpe and his colleagues although it was later to become the basis of the national statistics socio-economic classification (Marshall et al. 1988, Rose and O'Reilly 1998; Rose and Harrison 2012). Against the backdrop of feminism, there was much disquiet about the exclusion of women from the survey. The 1980s and beyond heralded a huge body of much needed research on women and employment as they spent increasing amounts of time in employment (Martin and Roberts 1984; Scott et al. 2010) which meant that an 'employment aggregate' approach to class had to properly consider men, women and families (Crompton 1998, 2006, see also Bottero 2014).

### **Contemporary relevance**

The paper is a product of its time and times change. When Goldthorpe and his colleagues were conducting their research in Luton in the early 1960s, the Vauxhall car factory employed close to 33,000 workers. Demand for manual labour was so high in 1965 that Vauxhall offered £5 to any employee who could introduce the company to a suitable recruit (Devine 1992: 9). The enormous car factory that once dominated the town has long disappeared. When production ceased in 2002, the original car plant was demolished. The site was subsequently developed into a housing estate with accompanying retail and leisure facilities. The Vauxhall head office is still in Luton and the commercial vehicle plant still stands, producing vans for a General Motors sister company (IBC Vehicles). It employs just 900 staff to produce 100,000 vans annually. Luton's economy is now dominated by the service sector with some light industry. The major employers are Luton Borough Council, the Luton and Dunstable NHS Hospital and various companies – Easy Jet, Monarch Airlines and TUI - operating out of London Luton Airport. Luton was identified from 2011 census data, along with Slough and Leicester, as a 'plural city' with a white British minority (45%) and a substantial Asian population including the Pakistani (14%), Bangladeshi (7%) and Indian (5%) communities (Simpson 2015: 52). Many Pakistani and West Indian men were employed at the Vauxhall plant (Manzoor 2008, Grant 2013). Unsurprisingly, sociologists have long turned their attention to the study of ethnic and racial inequalities as well as those of class and gender (Solomos 2003; Virdee 2014).

Ironically, the topics that dominated discussion of change in the British class structure before Goldthorpe and Lockwood turned their attention to working-class affluence are now, once again, centre stage. Rather than document an upward shift in the occupational structure, the evidence points to increasing polarisation. The growth of high-level professional and managerial occupations, especially in science and technology, continues. Growth is found in lower-level occupations, most notably cleaning and care work which is low paid and often undertaken by women (Grimshaw 2013). In the middle, technological change and increased automation is fuelling the decline of lower non-manual clerical and secretarial occupations and lower supervisory roles in manual employment (Felsted et al. 2015). The distribution of income and wealth has become more highly skewed as the returns on economic capital continue to exceed the rate of economic growth in countries such as the US, UK and beyond (Piketty 2014, Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). With the inordinate rise of high pay, the elite, especially the financial elite of London, is back in the limelight (Atkinson 2015). At the other end of the spectrum, the precariat struggle to get by with limited economic, cultural and social resources (Clark with Heath 2015, Hills, 2015, Savage et al. 2013, 2015). Trends from the 1940s indicated that class inequalities were becoming less extreme. Since the 1970s, however, these trends have become more extreme to the extent that commentators talk about living in a second gilded age (Newman and Jacobs 2010).

As class inequalities appear to be more extreme, so they have become more rigid than in the recent past. Although the relative chances of securing access to middle-class occupations did not change over the twentieth century, the growth of high-level managerial and professional jobs created more room at the top and facilitated an increase of intergenerational social mobility. This included long-range mobility from working-class origins to middle-class destinations (at least for men) (Goldthorpe et al. 1980, 1987). Now, attention is focused on the fact that absolute upward social mobility is less common than it was and downward social mobility has increased (Bukodi et al. 2015). With fierce competition for top jobs, middle-class parents mobilise their economic, social and cultural resources to secure intergenerational stability for their children and thereby circumvent downward social mobility (Devine 2004, Cassen et al. 2015). While young women and some minority ethnic

groups are acquiring educational qualifications, white working-class men are being left behind (Li and Devine 2011). There is increasing evidence that the socially mobile do not enjoy the same returns from high-level employment as the already privileged (Laurison and Friedman 2016; Friedman et al. 215). There is evidence that education has not proved to be a meritocratic process and a hierarchical, competitive system, where attending an elite university is critical to entry to high-level careers, may indeed exacerbate inequalities (Boliver 2013, Wakeling and Savage 2015.) Moreover, the persistence of non-meritocratic factors – exploiting connections, for example – alongside meritocratic processes ensure the advantaged have a habit of winning out (Devine and Li 2013).

Yet, Goldthorpe and Lockwood were right about the convergence (rather than assimilation) of the (lower) middle class and the (higher) working class. Polarisation at the top and bottom co-exists with fragmentation in the middle (Payne 2013). They did not, however, predict how far reaching these changes would be when they spoke of ‘rather limited modification of the class frontier’ (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 156). The power of the manual and non-manual divide has long disappeared as manual employment in manufacturing has greatly shrunk and low-level non-manual jobs have increased substantially in the service sector of the economy. Many of these low-level, non-manual occupations have terms and conditions of employment – poor pay, high levels of insecurity, limited promotion prospects – once associated with manual working-class jobs. Economically speaking, therefore, members of the lower middle class or the upper working class – be they called the intermediate class, affluent workers, emergent service workers or whatever – are indistinguishable from each other. Both classes have changed. The same can be said for patterns of residence and leisure. Although working-class identities remain remarkably strong, class identities are on the whole less clear. It has been argued that people rarely assert their social superiority and claim ordinariness instead (Devine 2004, Savage et al. 2001). Labour voting has waxed and waned. This is not to say that status preoccupations have disappeared altogether. It can be seen in the minutia of cultural practices – from the naming of children to the wearing of tattoos. Dissociation from the so-called ‘rough’ working class continues. Other class snobberies are articulated from time to time. Be that as it may, some argue that the boundaries between the middle class and the working class are not as powerful as they once were (Savage et al. 2015).

## **Conclusion**

It is striking to see how Goldthorpe and Lockwood, in their various position papers and subsequent publications of the Affluent Worker series, were engaged in the preoccupations of the 1950s and 1960s. They subjected academic and public understandings of change to systematic critical scrutiny with incredible clarity. They drew on long-standing theoretical ideas about class and status, and developed their own theory of class convergence rather than assimilation, providing an underlying narrative of the processes of change as well. This thinking informed their subsequent empirical research on affluent workers in Luton. Without doubt, *Affluence and the British Class Structure* and the publications that followed capture the best of British Sociology, that is theoretically-informed empirical research undertaken with imagination and flair. The paper still exudes the excitement of Sociology as an academic discipline and intellectual endeavour in the second half of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the opening decades of the twenty-first century. Their work emerged out of the flourishing of Sociology after the Second World War, had an enormous impact on the development of the discipline at a time of considerable expansion, and remains relevant – because the account of change was proved right in many respects - even in very different

times. Now a classic piece of Sociology that has entered the canon of the discipline, the paper is imperative reading for anyone seeking to understand the development of British Sociology in the last century and what makes it the discipline it is today.

The study of inequalities – of class, gender and race – remains central to British Sociology although the boundaries of the sub-discipline are much wider today than in the past in order to capture the complexity and diversity of the UK. The mix of methods, both quantitative and qualitative, is something to be celebrated in helping us to describe and explain both inequalities and change and continuity over the last 100 and more years. The paper reminds us that change is not simply determined by economic or political forces and the importance of understanding social and cultural change. The search for the connections between social structure and work, family and community might sound somewhat deterministic today. Rightly or wrongly, few sociologists draw on Merton's theory of reference groups although the contemporary focus on identities and feelings of belonging and exclusion speak of similar issues. Following Goldthorpe and Lockwood, the best studies of class inequalities emphasise its relational character. There is a widespread consensus about the importance of appreciating people's life histories and life situations in order to grasp their cultural practices, social dispositions and political preferences. Finally, and thankfully, the authors show how future generations of sociologists can 'speak of changes in the class structure of a society without necessarily implying that it is ceasing to be class stratified' (Goldthorpe and Lockwood 1963: 158). It is fitting that this paper appeared in the discipline of Sociology's first professional academic journal, *The Sociological Review*, in Britain. It is wonderful that it is being made available online now and easily accessible to all.

## Notes

Affluence and the British Class Structure was published a year before the 1964 General Election. It was won by the Labour Party, under the leadership of Harold Wilson, with an overall majority of four seats. The election victory came after thirteen years of Conservative Party rule. A fresh general election in 1966 saw Labour win again with a much larger majority of ninety-six MPs over the opposition parties. Labour's victories brought debate about the Party's ability to win power (ever again) to a quick end (although the same discussion has been raised every time Labour has lost at an election since!)

David Lockwood left the DAE in 1968 to become Professor of Sociology at Essex University where he remained as an emeritus professor after his retirement. David died in 2014. John Goldthorpe moved a year later in 1969 to become a Lecturer in Sociology and Fellow of Nuffield College Oxford where he remains as an ever-productive emeritus Fellow. I completed an undergraduate degree in Sociology and Government at Essex between 1980 and 1983 and I was taught social theory by David Lockwood in my second year of study. I went on to do a Masters and a PhD in the Sociology Department at Essex between 1983 and 1990 when Gordon Marshall, David Rose, Carolyn Vogler and Howard Newby were engaged in the international class project led by Erik Olin Wright. Gordon and David (Rose) were my PhD supervisors. It was a very exciting place to be as a student interested in class.

Despite his appreciation of some pioneering qualitative studies it was, and still is, a great tragedy for British Sociology that John Goldthorpe became so hostile towards these methods in the study of class and the discipline as a whole (see, for example, Goldthorpe 2006, 2007). While Goldthorpe is regarded internationally as one of the intellectual giants of twentieth-century British Sociology, he has cut a more controversial figure nationally as a result.



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