

**LSE**

THE LONDON SCHOOL  
OF ECONOMICS AND  
POLITICAL SCIENCE ■

# LSE Research Online

## Mike Savage End class wars

### Article (Accepted version) (Refereed)

**Original citation:**

Savage, Mike (2016) End class wars. *Nature*, 537 (7621). pp. 475-479. ISSN 0028-0836  
DOI: [10.1038/537475a](https://doi.org/10.1038/537475a)

© 2016 Nature Publishing Group

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/68289/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: November 2016

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## End class wars

### **Mike Savage calls for sociologists to resolve their differences over definitions of social class to allow better analyses of inequality**

In the past decade economic divisions have become so stark across the globe that the research agenda is being transformed to come to terms with them. The economist Thomas Piketty's (2014) *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* has had a profound influence – with over a million and a half sales it easily the most successful social science research monograph of all time. Like several others Piketty charted rising levels of income inequality in the past thirty years, especially towards top earning managers and professions. His main contribution was to show how in many rich nations, the balance of accumulated wealth – in assets such as property, savings, and goods – compared to the national income, has risen dramatically and are returning to disparities last seen over 100 years ago in the Victorian age.

These economic shifts pose challenges for understanding how social classes more broadly are changing. Piketty argues we are seeing the revival of a 'patrimonial class' – families living off inherited and accumulated wealth. Another economist, Branko Milanovic (2016) has claimed we are seeing the rise of a global plutocracy, the decline of the middle classes in the developed nations such as the USA and Europe, and the growing global middle classes, especially in Asia.

These shifts are causing intense public interest. In our work with the BBC on the *Great British Class Survey* (Savage et al 2013) we controversially defined seven 'new' classes, ranging from an 'elite' at the top to a 'precariat' at the bottom with five more fragmented classes between these. A staggering nine million people clicked on the BBC's online 'class calculator' to find out which of these new classes they might be in.

The shifts, and especially the polarisation with wealthy elites pulling away from the majority of middle and low income earners, now seem to be shaping world events in powerful ways. Across developed nations there is strong anti-elite political feeling, for instance marked in the American presidential race by both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump positioning themselves as Washington 'outsiders'. In England and Wales, the voting geography of the Brexit referendum tells its own story. Areas with high proportions of wealthy and well-educated senior professionals and managers voted disproportionately to remain in the European Union. Meanwhile the economically disadvantaged and insecure, more likely to be located in older industrial areas outside South East England tipped the balance in favour of leaving the EU.

These developments demand that we have a better understanding of how social class operates today, how it links to these intensifying economic inequalities, and how it relates to other inequalities such as gender, race and ethnicity. This is why many universities and funders are now investing in large research centres to address these concerns. For instance, the LSE's [International Inequalities Institute](#), which I co-direct, recently received £65 million, the largest grant in the history of the LSE from [Atlantic Philanthropies to train leaders to combat inequality](#). We are working with partners in the global south to develop this Atlantic Fellows programme, notably University of Capetown's [Graduate School of Development Policy and Practice](#) and the [Centre for the Study of Conflict and Social Cohesion in Chile](#). Elsewhere, Harvard has a multi-disciplinary program on [Inequality and Social Policy](#); Stanford a [Center on Poverty and Inequality](#), UCLA has Luskin's [Institute](#)

[for Inequality and Democracy](#) and Cornell has a [Center for Inequality](#) (also in receipt of Atlantic money). Other notable investments include the OECD's [Centre for Opportunity and Equality](#).

However, if we are to make progress, we need to resolve the current entrenched differences amongst sociologists about how social class should be conceptualised and measured. Understanding the nature of this current dispute requires me to reach back in history.

## **DEFINING CLASS**

The study of social class goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial revolution. When the -- - largely British -- scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century launched modern investigations into poverty and inequality during the early years of industrial capitalism, their understanding of social class had strong 'moral' overtones. They assumed that professionals and gentlemen were more respectable and worthy than the poorer classes, who were therefore responsible for their own misfortunes.

Accordingly, in the first major study of poverty, on 1880s London, the Liverpool shipowner Charles Booth defined the poorest streets of London as "vicious and semi-criminal". He categorised people into seven classes according to where they lived, based on households' economic position, as judged by school officers, policemen, and the like. Not surprisingly, moral judgements also abounded. Booth defined the poorest classes as having 'the life of savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship and their only luxury is drink'; whereas he saw the lower middle as a 'hardworking sober, energetic class'. Similarly, the upper middles were defined as a 'servant keeping class' — all part of a culture where 'keeping up appearances' was the essence of class itself.

Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the social sciences made a sustained attempt to strip out these moral dimensions — though of course as Imogen Tyler (2015) has recently insisted, these stigmatising and moralising dimensions remain very powerful today — as indicated by narratives around 'benefit scroungers', 'immigrants' and other 'undeserving' groups. From the mid twentieth century sociologists sought to provide a more objective, exact and precise definition of class — one which could be accurately measured regardless of one's political perspective. From the 1940s to the 1960s, predominantly American researchers developed scales of 'socio-economic status' which typically combined measures of income, education and occupational prestige. Duncan's Socio-Economic Index of 1960, for example, used measures of the proportion of people thinking that particular jobs had "good" or "excellent" prestige and linked these to the percentages of men in the occupation who completed high school or more and who reported at least \$3,500 in 1949 income.

British researchers from the same period, by contrast, elaborated a perspective which has become very powerful across the globe. They argued that social class should be assessed in a just one way: according to a person's occupation. This approach dated back to 1913, and placed people in one of six classes according to the 'skill' of the job. This led to a differentiation between a class of skilled non-manual occupations from skilled manual occupations, and placed at its heart a fundamental divide between manual and non-manual workers. This was, perhaps, a very 'British' way of thinking about class.

## **WORK LIFE**

In 1980 the British sociologists John Goldthorpe unveiled a more refined version of this occupational approach, in his pioneering studies of social mobility in the UK (Goldthorpe et al 1980). He found the older model unsatisfactory because the definition of skill was often opaque, and took no account of whether people were self-employed or employees, or whether they had supervisory authority. His new model came to be enshrined in the UK's Office of National Statistics by the later 1990s This

scheme has been elaborated internationally, most notably through the European Socio-Economic Classes (Rose and Harrison 2014), and serves as a benchmark across many different nations, especially where there are comparable survey questions on employment.

Its basic features are listed below

**Box 1**

**Categories of John Goldthorpe’s Class Scheme  
And Supposed Form of Regulation of Employment**

<i>Class</i>	<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Form of Regulation of Employment</i>
I	Professionals, Administrators and Managers, higher-grade	Service Relationship
II	Professionals, Administrators and Managers, lower-grade, and higher-degree Technicians	Service Relationship (modified)
III a	Routine Nonmanual Employees, higher-grade	Mixed
III b	Routine Nonmanual Employees, lower-grade	Labour Contract (modified)
IVabc	Small Proprietors and Employers, and self-employed Workers	
V	Lower-grade Technicians and Supervisors of manual workers	Mixed
VI	Skilled Manual Workers	Labour Contract (modified)
VII a	Nonskilled Manual Workers (other than in agriculture)	Labour Contract
VII b	Agricultural Workers	Labour Contract

Source: Goldthorpe (2000, p. 209)

Goldthorpe differentiated between a waged working class and a salaried ‘service’ class. Certain hybrid groups — the self-employed, or skilled technicians and supervisors — he deemed intermediate between these two. Labourers employed on a contract — paid specific, discrete, wages for their work — such as bus drivers, coal miners or factory workers. Doctors, lawyers, senior managers and academics, by contrast, Goldthorpe classed as having a more diffuse relationship with their employer, receiving prospective rewards (such as incremental salaries, pension entitlements etc) to acknowledge that the work they do cannot be so easily demarcated and regulated. Confusingly, he called this a ‘service’ relationship — but this should not be muddled with actual servants, or people working in the ‘services’ (such as retail or the health services), many of whom are employed on ‘labour contracts’.

Goldthorpe’s work was pivotal because of its pioneering use of representative national surveys which were becoming much more common from the later 1950s. By construing class as one distinctive variable — the nature of one’s job -- it is possible to use it to track social mobility, and to measure its influence on characteristics such as health or mortality. It can also, at least on the face of it, be differentiated from the effect of other variables such as income, education, race or sex. This approach has been shown to be robust (at least in the British case, where it is most widely used) for predicting earnings, the provision of fringe benefits such as pension entitlements , risks of unemployment and control over work scheduling (see the summary in Williams 2016).

One of the attractions of this approach is that it has proved highly effective in comparative research. Whereas previously nations had their own different ways of classifying occupations into larger social groups, it enabled researchers to measure differences in social mobility using formally identical criteria across different nations. Thus, Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) were able to rebut popular views that there is more social mobility in the United States than Europe, and to demonstrate that

social mobility was often higher in Eastern European nations which had undergone socialist transformation. This has been very important work. But in the current climate, its value has been called increasingly into question.

## **BLUNT INSTRUMENT**

For all its elegant clarity, Goldthorpe's approach has faced mounting criticism in recent years, of four kinds. Firstly, because it focuses on the employment relation as the key measure of class, it is less useful in those parts of the world – notably in the global south - where people, are less likely to be engaged in the formal labour market and are more likely to be in household labour (see e.g. Maloutas 2007). Similarly, the very large numbers of people who are retired, disabled or unemployed cannot be directly placed within it. Many feminists have objected to the focus on those who are in formal paid work – who often tend to be men!

Secondly, this approach lumps together people in large occupational classes, and does not pick out more specific occupational groups. Doctors or lawyers are not treated separately, but as part of a bigger 'higher grade' professional and managerial class, for instance. This is the reason why American sociologists David Grusky and Kim Weeden argue that a 'micro-class' methodology which distinguishes between different occupations, offers a more granular handle on the generation of inequalities. They (Weeden and Grusky 2012) have shown that a version of Goldthorpe's classes predicts much less of Americans' consumption practices, and political attitudes in the past decade, compared to the 1970s, whereas their own micro-class approach fares much better.

Third, economists have shown that the key dimensions of income and wealth inequality which have come to the fore in recent decades do not map strongly onto these big occupational classes. This is especially the case in the past thirty years when in many nations the incomes of the top 10%, and even more, the top 1% have pulled away from the rest. This means that only a minority of the even the high grade professionals and managers have enjoyed the largest increases in their economic position. The Goldthorpe class schema seems too blunt an instrument to explicate rising economic inequality. (Some economists, including Piketty, prefer to think of classes as broad income groups instead.)

Finally, Goldthorpe's model of class has not proved effective in explaining key social and political outcomes. For instance, political attitudes and actions are only weakly correlated with job type. Until the 1980s there was a strong tendency – in Europe and elsewhere - for those in manual occupations to support left and socialist movements, while the salaried voted for more conservative or established parties. This pattern is now much less clear. Even Goldthorpe concedes that his measures of class do not predict consumption patterns such as newspaper readership or leisure interests.

## **CAPITAL GAINS**

Since the late 1990s an alternative approach to class has become increasingly attractive to sociologists across the globe seeking to understand how class and inequality intersect. This 'capitals, assets and resources' (CARs) perspective is influenced by the French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1985). It defines class as an emergent property of different 'capitals' which allow their possessors to accumulate resources over time so that their relative advantages over others rise.

For Bourdieu, there are three capitals: economic, cultural and social. Economic capital refers to income and wealth – which is more attuned to the way economists measure inequality than to

sociologists such as Goldthorpe. Bourdieu also sees cultural activities as a separate form of capital, which can be used to generate advantages. He points to how those who in childhood are exposed to cultural riches such as attending the theatre or museums, become familiar with abstract ideas and perform well in the educational system: they parlay their cultural capital into educational attainment which enables them to get better jobs. Finally, social capital is the phenomenon by which those with privileged networks accrue further advantages. In part this is the familiar 'old school tie' system of swanky internships for gilded youth, but it also captures the way that those with wider social networks can gain advantages.

One advantage of this CARs perspective is that it can readily categorise people who don't have formal jobs, including the retired, (often female) carers, and children. It is able to use survey or other data sources to map anyone's economic, social and cultural capital. It recognises that the nature of cultural capital may vary between contexts. A good example is that older people with cultural capital tend to have more formal and highbrow activities – going to classical music, theatre, and so on – whereas younger people with cultural capital are more attracted to contemporary music, the social media, and 'emerging' forms of culture (see Prieur and Savage 2013).

The three capitals have strong synergies. In places where the rich are also culturally engaged in similar activities, and well-connected, for instance, then they form a strong and distinctive social class. In our book *Social class in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, (Savage et al 2015), we have argued that this is happening today with the very wealthy British elite, who likely have exclusive social networks and enjoy similar cultural pursuits, often from attending to the same kinds of elite universities together. London, and other major cities in the world, are becoming key venues for this elite formation. It seems that the super-rich discussed by Piketty and other economists are also socially and culturally exclusive.

But there are other classes with discrepant amounts of economic, social and cultural capital. One, which we called 'emerging service workers' have considerable amounts of social and cultural capital, but less money: these tend to be well educated young people who are unable to gain career footholds in today's competitive labour market. Our model of class from the *Great British Class Survey* therefore does not focus on the boundary between middle and working class, because they cannot be neatly separated in the way that the older occupational class models claim. Instead, we focused on two classes with radically different amounts of capital: the elite who had high amounts of all three capitals, and the 'precariat' who scored lowest on nearly every category. This is a model based only on UK data and would need to be finessed in other nations to take account of their unique situation – but its general focus is more attuned to polarisation at the extremes of the class system which seems intuitively powerful in many areas of the world.

This approach might offer an analytical focus for understanding why mobilisation against 'elites' is so salient in so many places at the moment. It also shows how investing in education, as is happening in most nations, does not necessarily reduce class divisions, but accentuates them since those who have the most capitals who are best placed to compete effectively to gain access to the most august institutions. It is therefore a challenging, even pessimistic view, of current trends.

## **POLICY ISSUES**

These differences between these approaches to class are not just academic debates, but affect how we address growing inequalities. For the occupational class approach, class divisions are built into the structure of employment, and therefore modifying these becomes central to addressing equality. Proponents of this approach therefore argue that investing in education by itself will not

address the underlying class inequalities, and that re-structuring the economy and employment relationships has to be central to addressing class inequality

Those supporting CARs approaches offer a more multi-dimensional perspective. A central policy feature is to consider how the accumulation drawn from different capitals might be challenged. Piketty's call for a 1% annual wealth tax is a well-known example. More generally, policies over housing wealth, inheritance, generational equity, and citizenship can be seen as ways of creating more equitable distributions. These concerns extend to attempting to address cultural and social capital, for instance by developing educational policies to support those from disadvantaged backgrounds to move to higher education, or to build the social networks of those who are marginalised can all be seen to have some potential.

## **CULTURE CLASH**

Critics of CARs have conceptual and methodological beefs. Defenders of occupational approaches to class are critical of conflating class with cultural or social dimensions, and think this leads to imprecision. They also argue that occupational class offers a better way of placing people in classes than their income, as this can fluctuate quite considerably, and can be difficult to measure (do we look at household or individual income? Do we include benefits, pension savings, etc?) People might also be less likely to accurately state their income than their occupation, which it follows is the most practical and easy way of defining someone's class.

Similarly there are differences over whether cultural capital is as important as was claimed by Bourdieu. Some feel it is of minor, or secondary importance, arguing that it assumes that intellectual and high-brow culture carries more power than it actually does today. The Harvard sociologist Michele Lamont (1992) argued that Americans are much less respectful of intellectual and artistic values than the French, for instance. It is doubtful too that 'highbrow' culture has such importance in China, and indeed many nations which have a history of communist and socialist governments. Numerous sociologists have examined the rise of what is often called 'the cultural omnivore' who grazes between Mozart, Big Brother, Bollywood films and the LA Lakers and is much more culturally pluralist than is recognised by those arguing for the significance of cultural capital. These are all challenging issues which require proponents of the CARs perspective to substantiate their arguments about cultural and social capital.

## **CLASS WARS**

I have shown how sociologists are at loggerheads over different approaches to defining class. This came to a head in the debate about the seven classes we defined using the Great British Class Survey, when defenders of the occupational approaches saw our approach of defining classes as incoherent data mining, using a flawed data source because the BBC's web survey was not fully representative of the UK population (Mills 2014).

The reasons for this acrimonious debate are several-fold. To some extent, it is tribal: different research communities have their allegiances. Established sociologists feel that that the late 20<sup>th</sup> century approaches to class have been tested and elaborated over many years. Employment categories are particularly beloved of researchers focusing on standard quantitative analysis of nationally representative sample surveys, such as Britain's famous birth cohort studies which are envied throughout the world.

The CARs perspective is popular with younger, more heterodox sociologists, especially those trained in qualitative methods (such as ethnography or case studies). There are also different theoretical styles: the occupational class school prefers formal model building, whereas the CARs researchers are more concerned with describing what they see as going on. It follows that the newer researchers are more attracted to using less standard data sets – such as non-representative web surveys.

Defenders of the CARs approach, see new forms of elitism and snobbery at work, which do much the same job as the old. Knowing ‘hip’ brands, avoiding vulgar holiday destinations, and living in trendy and fashionable neighbourhoods is very much linked to snobbish concerns.

## **BRIDGE THE DIVIDE**

Can these camps be reconciled? In my view, yes. Partly it is a matter of both sides showing modesty, appreciating what the other has to offer, and extending olive branches. Above all, both camps are concerned with the injustices of class inequality and are concerned to challenge the advantages of the rich and powerful. It would be a shame if this shared aim is lost sight of because of internecine squabbles.

In this spirit of reconciliation, it can be noted that the two approaches are actually using the class concept in different ways. The occupational approach seeks to define class as a distinct variable, so that its distinctive effects can be noted on life chances, mortality, educational attainment and so forth. It does this job fairly well. The CARs approach is concerned with class as a historical process – identifying the ways that classes form as linked economic, social and cultural groups which can thus shape social change in the future, for instance through claiming that powerful elites are a fundamentally significant class today.

It follows that there is plenty of scope for a ‘horses for courses’ approach. One way of making progress would be to consider further how occupational classes are associated with cultural, social and economic processes. Here, it is possible to take advantage of new forms of data to explore congruencies and differences in their perspectives. Nationally representative surveys often do not have developed questions on cultural or social capital. And with a sample sizes rarely extending beyond 10,000 people there are often limits to examining outliers and ‘micro-classes’.

There is a growing interest in using tax records to examine economic inequality. Here there is no need to sample, and analysis of income and occupation can take place on the entire population. Such data has no information on social and cultural capital, but perhaps they could be combined with, ‘geodemographic data’, collected by market researchers on local neighbourhoods. This has extensive information on consumption and spending. Similarly there is a vast trove of data on communication, connections, consumption, health status and so on, held by Google, Facebook, Amazon and the like.

As a first step, developing interdisciplinary work offers very exciting possibilities. Engaging economists, anthropologists and political scientists alongside sociologists is the most likely way of making petty internal disputes amongst sociologists look parochial. Social scientists have been slower than natural scientists in moving away from disciplinary identities towards interdisciplinary teams working on common problems. The study of inequality can only be tackled by all social scientists working together and pooling their skills. Models such as the LSE’s *International Inequalities Institute* – as well as many others around the world – will play a vital role in allowing focused studies and will generate the new scientific analyses of class which are vitally needed to unravel the increasingly unequal and riven societies we live in.



## References

- Bourdieu, P., (1985), *Distinction*, London, Routledge
- Erikson, R., & Goldthorpe, J. H. (1992). *The constant flux: A study of class mobility in industrial societies*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Goldthorpe, J.H., with Llewellyn, C., and Payne, G., (1980), *Social Mobility and the Class Structure in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Clarendon
- Maloutas, T. (2007). Socio-economic classification models and contextual difference: The 'European Socio-economic Classes' (ESeC) from a South European angle. *South European Society & Politics*, 12(4), 443-460.
- Milanovic, B., (2016), *Global inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press
- Mills, C. (2014). 'The great British class fiasco: A comment on Savage et al' .*Sociology*,
- Piketty, T., (2014), *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Yale, NJ, Yale UP
- Prieur, A., & Savage, M. (2013). Emerging forms of cultural capital.*European Societies*, 15(2), 246-267.
- Rose, D., & Harrison, E. (Eds.). (2014). *Social class in Europe: An introduction to the European socio-economic classification*. Routledge.
- Savage, M., Cunningham, N., Devine, F., Friedman, S., Laurison, D., Mckenzie, L., Miles, A., Snee, H., and Wakeling, P (2015)., *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*, London, Penguin
- Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects: Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain*. Zed Books.
- Weeden, K. A., & Grusky, D. B. (2012). 'The Three Worlds of Inequality', *American Journal of Sociology*, 117(6), 1723-178
- Williams, M., (2016), 'An old model of social class? Job characteristics and the NS-SEC schema', *Work, Employment and Society*, online first.