

# The British class system is becoming more polarised between a prosperous elite and a poor 'precariat'

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*Mike Savage discusses the results of the largest British class survey ever conducted. It shows that class divisions remain very powerful and are becoming more entrenched. There is a growing gulf between the elite and the lower classes, and what used to be termed the middle and working classes seem to be splintering into social classes with systematically differing amounts of cultural and social capital.*



The Great British Class Survey (GBCS) was launched in January 2011. More than 161,000 people took part in the BBC Lab UK's web survey, making this the largest study of social class ever undertaken in the UK. The results have just been published in the journal *Sociology*, and presented in a plenary session at the British Sociological Association Conference in London on April 3<sup>rd</sup>.

BBC LabUK teamed up with the leading sociologists Professor Mike Savage (London School of Economics) and Professor Fiona Devine (Manchester University), to examine the shape of the British Class system today. The focus was to determine if traditional ideas of a working, middle and upper class still applied in contemporary Britain. The research team who analysed the data included Niall Cunningham, Yaojun Li, Mark Taylor, Andrew Miles, Sam Friedman, Johs Hjellbrekke and Brigitte Le Roux.

Our core finding is that the British class system is becoming more polarised between a prosperous elite and a poor 'precariat', and also that what used to be termed the middle and working classes seem to be splintering into social classes with systematically differing amounts of cultural and social capital. The British class system is hence fracturing horizontally, at the same time that social divisions are becoming more entrenched. This is a sobering picture which demonstrates that class divisions remain very powerful – even if they have changed in their nature.

## **Nationally representative class system**

The GBCS web survey suffered from a strong selection bias, with participants being predominantly drawn from the well-educated social groups – the kind of people who tend to be the BBC audience! To overcome this we ran a second identical survey (with survey company GfK) based on a nationally representative sample. We have used the data from the two surveys in parallel; defining nationally representative class groups using the GfK survey and uncovering detailed information from the GBCS for each class group about education, cultural/leisure activities, jobs/income/savings and geography. This offers unparalleled insights into the organisation of class inequality today.

## **Economic, social and cultural capital**

Traditionally a person's class was defined by their job, but many sociologists think this is now too simplistic. Influenced by the arguments of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, they argue that a person's social class has three dimensions: economic, social, and cultural. To measure an individual's 'resources' in each of these dimensions, sociologists look not only at economic capital (income, savings, house value, etc.), but also social capital (the number, and also the status of people one knows), and cultural capital (the extent and nature of cultural interests and activities). In the GBCS we had measures of all three of these forms of capital, to see how they contribute to a person's class.

## **Seven class groups**

Using latent class analysis on measures of economic, social and cultural capital, from our nationally representative sample, we defined a new model of class in Britain today. It contains the following seven class groups:

- **Elite**– this is the most privileged group in the UK. They are set apart from the other six classes, especially because of their wealth, and they have the highest levels of all three capitals – and are marked out because of their extremely high levels of economic capital.
- **Established middle class** – this is the second wealthiest class group and it scores highly on all three capitals. This is a comfortably off, secure section of the British population, and is the largest of the seven classes. Its members tend to be socially highly connected and score second highest for cultural capital.
- **Technical middle class** – this is a small, distinctive new class group that is prosperous but scores low for social and cultural capital. It is distinguished by its relative social isolation – with its members reporting few contacts – and cultural disengagement.
- **New affluent workers** – this young class group is socially and culturally active, especially for youthful forms of cultural activity (contemporary music, sport, internet), and has middling levels of economic capital.
- **Traditional working class**– this class scores low on all forms of capital, but is not completely deprived. Its members have reasonably high house values, which is explained by this group having the oldest average age (66 years).
- **Emergent service workers**– this new, young, urban group is relatively poor, but has high social and cultural capital, especially for popular ‘emerging’ kinds of cultural capital.
- **Precariat** (The precarious proletariat) – this is the poorest, most deprived class and scores low for social and cultural capital. It is a relatively large group of the population.

### Headline findings

- Only 39% of the population fit the older stereotypes of middle and working class –those in the Established middle class and the Traditional working class. The majority of the population belong to one of the other social classes which have not been previously dissected.
- New affluent workers and Emergent service workers appear to be the children of the Traditional working class, which has been fragmented by de-industrialisation, mass unemployment, immigration and a shift from manufacturing to service-based employment. Generational change and social change intersect in powerful ways.
- Many people think that the problem of social and cultural engagement is more marked in poorer class groups, but the GBCS shows that our levels of social and cultural capital don’t always mirror our economic success. The Technical middle class score low for social and cultural capital but is quite well off, while the Emergent service workers score highly for cultural and social capital but are not very prosperous.
- The Elite and Precariat groups at the extremes of our class system have been missed in conventional approaches to class analysis, which have focussed on the middle and working classes.

### How the class groups were identified

We asked a series of questions about income, house value, savings, cultural and leisure activities and what jobs one’s friends do. From the answers we were able to determine a person’s economic, social and cultural capital scores. We did latent class analysis using these scores to determine the shape of the British Class system. What emerged was a map of seven class groups.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## **About the author**

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