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**MCINTOSH AND MUNK'S SUPPOSED TEST OF THE VALIDITY
OF THE E-G CLASS SCHEMA:
A COMMENT**

by

Robert Erikson and John H. Goldthorpe

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McIntosh and Munk (forthcoming) claim that the class schema that we have developed (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) lacks validity and should not be taken as a basis for studies of intergenerational social mobility. Their paper is founded on a serious - and surprising - misconception of why the schema is in fact used by sociologists in mobility research and, for this reason, their test of its validity is essentially misdirected. Moreover, the test itself is so ineptly carried out as to be in any event of little value. We restrict ourselves to making the three following points.

1. McIntosh and Munk (M&M) correctly recognise that the class schema aims to make operational the idea that class positions are defined by employment relations and more specifically, in the case of employees, by the differing forms of their employment contracts (see further Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992 Goldthorpe 2007, vol. 2, ch. 5). But they then quite mistake the aim of analyses of intergenerational social mobility - our own and those of others - that apply the class schema. The aim is, they believe, to demonstrate that it is factors *directly associated with* individuals' class positions that determine their mobility or immobility - to the neglect of such other factors as individuals' ability, education, skills or motivation. Thus, they write (pp. 13-14, our emphasis), '...when we ask what actually determines the type of employment contract an individual is likely to obtain when he or she enters the labour market ... Erikson and Goldthorpe tell us that this depends *only* on the type of labour contract that the individual's father had.' We claim nothing of the kind. And we note that M&M fail to back this (mis)representation of our position with any specific reference to our work. Our own and other sociologists' concern with intergenerational class mobility is primarily motivated by the fact that class - and in particular as

measured by our schema - has been shown to have a substantial association with a wide range of individuals' life-chances: for example, in regard to economic insecurity (risk of unemployment) and economic prospects (Elias and McKnight 2003; Goldthorpe and McKnight 2006; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007), mortality (Erikson 2006; White *et al.* 2007) and children's educational attainment (Breen *et al.* 2007; Jackson *et al.* 2007). Interest thus in turn arises over the degree of intergenerational continuity or discontinuity that exists among individuals in the class positions that they hold, and over whether this continuity is changing over time or differs across societies. However, once empirical regularities in these respects have been established, the focus of attention moves on to the various processes through which class immobility or mobility is generated; and, at this stage, the mediating roles of ability, education etc. are given full recognition. We find it remarkable that M&M should at one point refer to Breen and Goldthorpe (2001), which is as clear an example as could be wished of this research procedure - though among many others that could be cited - and yet still miss what should be entirely obvious: i.e. that separating out the direct and the many possible indirect effects that are involved in the dependence of class destinations on class origins is a central concern of mobility analyses that use the E-G schema.

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2. Since M&M's supposed test of the validity of the E-G class schema rests on the misconception indicated in the foregoing, it is rendered largely irrelevant from the start. But even if the test were to be taken on its own - mistaken - terms, the results to which it leads would still be of little consequence since M&M do not in fact work with any established version of the schema. They rely, rather, on a home-made construction that is entirely inadequate and provides no serious basis for evaluating

the real thing. In sociological research, the E-G schema is implemented by coding detailed occupation-by-employment-status units - typically numbering in hundreds - into the classes of the schema by means of publicly available algorithms. And algorithms, we would add, that have by now been widely tested for their *criterion validity*: i.e. in order to ensure that occupation and employment status can thus be used as effective proxies for employment relations, so that the class schema does to an acceptable degree capture what, conceptually, it is intended to capture (for the British case, see e.g. Evans 1992; Evans and Mills 1998; Rose and O'Reilly 1998; Rose, Pevalin and O'Reilly 2005; and for the development of the schema so as to provide a common EU socio-economic classification, Rose and Harrison, forthcoming and www.iser.essex.ac.uk/esec). However, M&M entirely fail to follow this practice. They first (p. 8) group the occupational data that they draw on in their mobility analyses into a limited number of very crude categories - 16 in the case of fathers but, it seems, only 11 in the case of children - and in a way that they do not explain.¹ They then aggregate these categories (Table 2) into an - alleged - five-class version of the E-G schema, likewise without any satisfactory account of the procedures they apply. They claim (p. 8) that in this regard they follow 'the rule' of the E-G schema 'as closely as possible'. But we are at a loss to know what they might mean by this. To repeat, the schema can only be properly applied on the basis of detailed and explicit algorithms of the kind referred to. As might then be expected, the class schema produced by M&M in various ways departs, and sometimes quite grossly so, from all known instantiations of the E-G schema. For example, routine nonmanual employees and also 'ordinary' state employees (clerks? postmen?) are included in M&M's Class I alongside higher-grade and independent professionals; wage-workers in agriculture are lumped together in their Class III with self-employed workers in agriculture,

presumably farmers; and the disposition of managers of different kinds remains totally mysterious since they seem not to figure in any of the occupational categories listed. We do not, therefore, find it in any way surprising that M&M should be able to show that the classes they construct display undue heterogeneity. But this, we must stress, says nothing whatever about the E-G schema.

3. As well as devising a test of the validity of the E-G schema that has little relevance to its actual use in mobility research and failing to produce anything like an adequate version of the schema for the purpose of their test, M&M base their empirical work on a data-set with various features that can only be described as bizarre. For example, according to their Tables 2 and 3, over 40% of men and women in their sample when interviewed in 2000 were self-employed - i.e. in M&M's Class II - as compared with only 18% of their fathers who were in this class in 1976; and this shift is then largely compensated for in that less than 2% of those interviewed in 2000 were unskilled workers - i.e. in M&M's Class V - as compared with 23% of their fathers. Is there, we wonder, any confirmation for these remarkable figures - implying, as they do, an extraordinary structural transformation of Danish society - in census or labour force statistics? And, still more astonishingly, M&M report (p.9) that, according to their Table 3, not only does Denmark have higher mobility than all other countries included in Björklund and Jäntti's review (2000) but further shows a rank correlation between respondent's class and father's class *that is significantly negative*. This is a result never previously reported in the literature. M&M seem themselves to have - passing - doubts as to its credibility. However, we would suggest that for researchers less concerned to make out a case at all costs, findings of the kind in question would have served as strong danger signals regarding the general adequacy of the data being

used and/or of the classificatory procedures being followed, and would have led to some serious re-consideration before any publication was envisaged. As things stand, we would think it unwise to take seriously any of the results of M&M's econometric analyses.

Intergenerational social mobility is a research field in which a promising constructive engagement between sociologists and economists is now developing. In this context, we regret the entirely negative nature of this response to M&M's contribution. Its quality leaves us little alternative.

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¹ The positions of the parents seem to have been decided by asking the respondents to place their parents in one of 16 predetermined categories (Hansen 2000), while we could find no information on how the positions of the respondents themselves were determined.

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