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Rethinking class analysis: some reflections on current issues and possible new forms of empirical research — [Source link](#)

Roger Penn

Institutions: Queen's University Belfast

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**Rethinking Class Analysis: Some Reflections on Current Issues and
Possible New Forms of Empirical Research**

Professor Roger Penn

School of Sociology

Queen's University, Belfast

2016

Introduction

This paper examines the current state of social stratification research. Its focus is mainly upon the British tradition of research but its reflections also apply more broadly to wider European and North American literature. The paper explores the classical tradition of class analysis in Britain and probes how this became superseded by newer forms of sociological analysis which are rooted primarily in occupational differences. The paper argues that there is a need for a double shift in approach. This would involve a renewal of interest in class-based relations of structured inequality and also a shift of focus away from highly quantitative approaches in favour of different styles of empirical research.

We live in a period of significant social turbulence. This is epitomised politically in the growth of parties like Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy and Jeremy Corbyn's successful campaign to lead the Labour Party in Britain. The present crisis can be dated from the onset of global recession after the financial collapse in 2007 and 2008. A related feature of this era of social change has been the best-selling study *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* [2014] by the French economist Thomas Piketty and Paul Mason's *PostCapitalism* [2015], both of which foreground relations between capital and labour in their respective analyses. One interesting feature in these developments has been the resurgence of popular interest in Marx, Marxism and broader forms of class analysis. The present paper explores the relevance of class analysis for contemporary studies of social inequality. It examines the 'classical tradition' in relation to social stratification research and assesses why it went out of fashion and whether the baby was thrown out with the bathwater.

Part 1

The Classical Tradition of Class Analysis

The classical tradition of class analysis in Britain incorporated theoretical underpinnings derived from both Marx and Weber. It was part of a wider attempt to create an alternative theoretical paradigm to structural-functionalism which had dominated during the 1950s and 1960s.

However, class was not clearly defined within this discourse. Two separate approaches ran in tandem and occasionally coalesced. The neo-Marxist emphasis on class as based upon property relations was paralleled by other concepts of class that were rooted within the division of labour of capitalist societies. The most popular of the latter were the concepts of the 'middle' and 'working class' which referred to groupings internal to the broader category of non-propertied labour. These binary concepts dominated much non-economic sociology. Indeed, a great deal of routine sociology during the 1960s and 1970s simply incorporated class as its predominant concept. Indeed, Stinchcombe – a leading American sociologist at the time – famously quipped that 'sociology has only one independent variable, class' [1968]. In the field of educational sociology, a great deal of research examined the question of why working class children failed to achieve similar results at school when compared to their middle class counterparts [see Floud *et al* 1957; Douglas, 1964; Bernstein, 1975 and Willis, 1977]. Similarly, political sociology had a preoccupation with why significant numbers of working class voters failed to support left-of-centre social democratic and socialist parties. [see Parkin, 1967; Nordlinger, 1967 and MacKenzie & Silver, 1968].

A series of interconnected changes problematized the hegemony of these traditional class approaches within sociological discourse. The first involved manifest *lacunae* within the dominant paradigm itself. These included the absence of research on other aspects of structured inequality such as gender, ethnicity, age and disability. A great deal of empirical research at that time in economic sociology focussed exclusively upon samples of male factory workers [see Goldthorpe *et al*, 1968a, 1968b and 1969 as well as Blackburn and Mann, 1979]. Since the late 1970s there has been an efflorescence of research in these other spheres of inequality at the expense of class analyses.

A second element in the demise of specifically Marxist forms of class analysis involved the increasingly turgid and arcane [not to mention scholastic] nature of much of the literature in the area [see for example Cutler *et al* 1977 and Jessop, 1988]. Much of this was engaged in narrow debates about the political economy of modern capitalist societies which seemed increasingly distanced from developments outside the narrow confines of academia.

A third feature was the collapse of the simple notions of the 'working class' and 'middle class' amongst sociologists. My own publications at that time had a part to play in this. My empirical research on skilled manual workers showed how they were a distinct stratum within the wider matrix of social stratification [see Penn, 1985b and 1990]. This was part of a wider investigation into the disjunction between sociological and historical discourses concerning the chronology and trajectory of the British working class. The empirical results of this research threw into doubt the long cherished belief that there had ever been a homogenous working class with common interests or experiences in Britain.

The final element in this shift of emphasis away from classical notions of class was changes in the world that lay outside academia. These included the Falklands War: this puzzled many stratification experts like Howard Newby who stated at the 1983 Social Stratification conference in Cambridge that "nobody realized that the working class was nationalistic"! I remember being perplexed by this odd claim which revealed a lack of knowledge about popular consciousness both historically and at the time it was made. This lack of connection with the world around them amongst economic sociologists also included the wider impact of the implosion of the Labour Movement symbolized by the 1984/5 Miners Strike in Britain [see Penn, 1985a]. Indeed, the evident disconnection between sociology and events was a major factor in the creation of the Social Change and Economic Life research initiative by the ESRC in the mid-1980s [see Gallie, 1994]. The 1980s also witnessed successive Conservative Party electoral victories in Britain and led, ultimately, to the defeat of the Left within the Labour Party and the creation of Blairite 'New Labour'. The sociology of class was left floundering as the strong relationship between class and voting in Britain [which actually only dated from 1945] disappeared before their eyes [see Robertson, 1984]. This rendered the discussion of working class 'deviant' support for the Conservative Party [see Parkin, 1967 and Taylor, 1978] irrelevant as working class conservatism became the new norm and was encapsulated in notions such as 'Basildon Man'! [see Evans, 1999]. These developments threw into doubt many taken-for-granted assumptions amongst sociologists and led many to cease to investigate class differences at all [see Lee and Turner, 1996]. Overall, these elements outlined above combined to make class analysis both

unfashionable and, in many sociologists eyes, largely irrelevant to their main substantive concerns.

More recently there has been an infusion of American-style approaches to the study of social inequality [see for example Lambert *et al* 2012]. By this I mean an application of rigorous statistical modelling and an emphasis on dimensions of stratification. This paradigm is seen clearly in the publication policies of the most prestigious US journals in sociology such as the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Social Forces*. In the United States of America such approaches have long represented the dominant paradigm [see Coleman *et al*, 1966, Blau *et al* , 1967 and Featherman & Hauser 1978]. This new approach has involved considerable debate about how best to measure individual-level inequality and which occupational scheme is the best for assessing social stratification [see Lambert & Bihagen, 2014 and Connelly *et al*, 2016]. Many data sets such as the British Household Panel Study and the European Social Survey now allow the use of a wide range of such measures based primarily upon occupation but also on educational attainment and patterns of social interaction such as friendship and marriage.

One problem with this ‘new wave’ revisionism is that it is difficult to express results in a language that is intelligible to more than a few specialists. As a consequence most sociologists outside the specialist field of social stratification still rely on common sense categories to interpret their results and/or they use the myriad of possible measures/schemes in an arbitrary and ‘ad hoc’ fashion. This is exemplified in the popular handbook by Shaw *et al* [2007] which provides long lists of different conceptual schemes for measuring structured inequalities without any useful guidance as to which might be the most appropriate in any particular context.

Clearly there is a myriad of different ways of measuring inequality available currently to empirical sociologists. All rely, in the main, on data collected about occupations¹. All are rooted in the way such occupational data was originally categorized by the UK Census authorities around the time of the First World War

¹ This equally applies to the recent efforts of Savage *et al* [2013] to devise a new classification. Mills [2014, and 2015] has provided a trenchant critique of their approach which bears considerable similarity to earlier classifications devised by market researchers [see Acorn, 2015]. My thanks go to David Dawkins of Probit Research for his assistance with this.

[see Penn, 1985b]. The basis for the first systematic sub-division of the population based upon occupational position was a specific demographic and public health interest in the problem of infant mortality rates [see Registrar General, 1911 and Stevenson, 1928]. The categories used were:

1. Upper
2. Intermediate
3. Skilled
4. Intermediate skill
5. Unskilled
6. Textile workers
7. Coal miners
8. Agricultural labourers

The main heuristic behind this seminal classification was to be able to demonstrate that there was a clear, graded increase in rates of infant mortality from class 1 to class 5 and thereafter random variation. The purpose was to galvanize political action in Parliament and Whitehall to tackle preventable causes of infant mortality. All subsequent official and almost all sociological categorizations have been based upon this initial model. New occupations are forced into these procrustean templates. This is problematic as it is by no means self-evident that the axial principles that underpinned the initial classification still hold.

Such occupational classifications all assume a hierarchy to these underlying measures; terms like 'gradient' [see Marmot, 2004 and 2015] or 'ladder' [see Ipsos MediaCT, 2009] crop up regularly. Interestingly all these categorizations place the same occupations at the base of the ladder and nearly all put the same groupings at the summit. Unskilled manual workers ['labourers'] are placed at the bottom and professionals like doctors, lawyers and professors are at the top. Given that there is indeed a large empirical difference between each pole, all these schemes will [and do] inevitably explain a degree of variation on other outcomes [health, education, income etc]. However, when scrutinized carefully

the overall amount of variation is generally quite low [see Lambert & Penn, 2000].

In order to gauge whether there is a case to re-engage with classical forms of class analysis it is important to re-examine some of its key aspects. Marx and Marxists emphasize the capitalist nature of contemporary societies. Their models vary between synchronic binary [capitalist: proletarian] and more complex diachronic models that emphasize 'fractions of capital' [finance vs. industrial capital] and/or the 'petty bourgeoisie'. Overall, all these Marxist class categories were firmly rooted in the structures of property relations within capitalist societies.

Weber also identified the capitalist class as a central feature of contemporary societies [see Weber, 1961 and 1968]. He developed notions that as well as the basic dichotomous divide between capitalists and routine manual workers there were also 'positively privileged' groupings whose relative class advantages were rooted in the labour market and the world of work. These 'intermediate classes' included the self-employed, professional/managerial strata and 'exceptionally qualified' [ie skilled] workers. We can see that such a Weberian class model allows for 'multiple nodes of market power' as a basis for a wider, more complex class model.

Dubious Assumptions

There are a series of dubious assumptions in this more recent sociological literature on structured social inequality. The first centres upon this reliance on 'occupation' as the central component of measures of social stratification. This approach is evident in Goldthorpe's various efforts over the years [see Goldthorpe & Hope, 1974; Goldthorpe *et al*, 1980; and Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1993], and in the rival CAMSIS scale.² The fundamental problem with these approaches is that in a real sense the tail wags the dog: conveniently collected official data on occupations produce occupationally-driven measures of stratification [either categorical or scaled]. This renders wider issues of class based on property relations more or less completely invisible. However, it

² The Camsis scale is presented at <http://www.camsis.stir.ac.uk/#Citing>. Its origins can be found in Stewart *et al* 1973, Stewart *et al* 1980 and Prandy & Lambert, 2003.

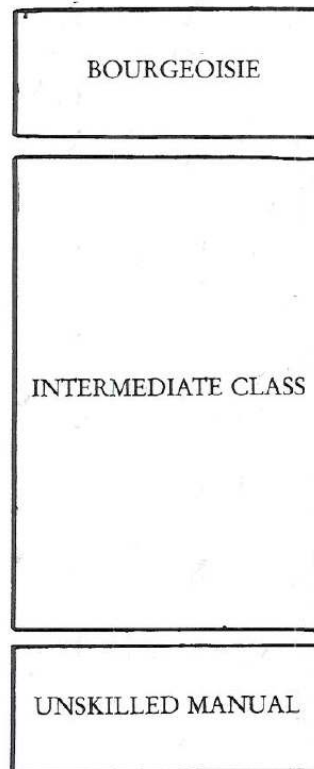
remains an enormous sleight of hand. I made a serious attempt to remedy this in the model proposed in 1981 in my critique of the Nuffield 'class' categorization [Penn, 1981] and which I subsequently used [Penn & Dawkins, 1983; Penn, 1985b] to model patterns of intermarriage over time.

The model proposed and subsequently utilized incorporated the following seven categories:

1. Bourgeoisie
2. Petty bourgeoisie
3. Co-ordinators
4. Routine white collar
5. Skilled manual
6. Semi-skilled manual
7. Unskilled manual

The data analyzed were based upon information from 2041 marriage records and the research showed that property relations were fundamental to understanding how patterns of intermarriage were structured empirically between the mid nineteenth and late twentieth century [see below].

TABLE 4
A Model of the Generic Class Structure of British Industrial Capitalism



Source: Penn and Dawkins, 1983

An important aspect of the empirical research that underpinned this empirical analysis was that it allowed for a variety of possible outcomes. This was a feature of the pioneering log-linear analysis utilized. The precise number of classes was not specified *a priori* and the conventional 'working class: middle class' divide could have been one possible outcome. Significantly, the results showed that it was not. Rather the fundamental class boundaries lay within both the working class and the middle class. However, if a simple binary model had been used to explore the data, it would have undoubtedly found a 'middle class'/'working class' divide. However, such a result would have been an artefact of the underlying conceptual model and would have missed the internal boundaries [heterogeneity] within these two classes. The bourgeoisie stood out as a 'positively privileged' class and unskilled manual workers as 'negatively privileged'. Interestingly, this underlying pattern to the structure of intermarriage did not change significantly over time.

The second flawed assumption is the continued reliance on a binary 'working class'/'middle class' explanatory model. In Goldthorpe's recent formulation [2010] he continues to insist that 'manual workers and routine non-manual workers' form a lower category than 'salaried employees'. This reproduces his long held *a priori* assumption that there is a 'working class' in contemporary capitalist societies.

From the late 1960s through the 1970s class was generally conceptualized by British economic sociologists in terms of 'typical market and work situation' [see Goldthorpe & Lockwood *et al*, 1968a, 1968b and 1969 as well as Lockwood, [1960 and 1966]. This involved a close inter-connection of the study of work [industrial sociology] and the study of labour market position. This was exemplified in Goldthorpe *et al*'s seminal *Affluent Worker* research. It was also seen in Blackburn and Mann's classic study of *The Working Class in the Labour Market* [1979]. It was a central tenet of these approaches in economic sociology that the findings of industrial sociology were a necessary and vital component of any satisfactory analysis of the structural contours of inequality in contemporary societies. It is a strange paradox that Goldthorpe and Blackburn should have restricted their respective subsequent analyses to debates about occupational categorizations whilst the world of occupations has changed significantly.

But does it make any sense to lump all manual or even routine workers together into an homogenous category? In terms of market situation many manual workers are salaried nowadays, as are many routine non-manual workers working for organizations like the National Health Service, Universities and BAe. In terms of 'market position', many skilled manual workers are paid significantly more than either nonskilled manual workers or routine non-manual workers. These include traditional apprenticed craft workers and skilled manual workers at the apex of internal career trajectories, particularly in capital-intensive industries like paper, steel and chemicals [see Penn, 1990]. In terms of typical 'market and work situation', the relative power of skilled manual workers continues to be underpinned by strategies of exclusion aimed simultaneously at management and the nonskilled [as well as other skilled groups]. The notion of a 'working class' remains a fixation for many sociologists but it is, in reality, a chimera. Unfortunately the synthesis of market and work situation has been

lost in most contemporary economic sociology. Sociology in general lacks detailed maps of the changing nature of modern work and how this has impacted on conventional boundaries within the stratification system. In particular, the growth of computerisation and the enormous expansion of people with university degrees have not been incorporated satisfactorily³.

A third area that is highly problematic in the conflation of class with occupation is that it completely fails to encompass the unemployed in a meaningful way⁴. In the standard occupationally-driven categorizations the unemployed are allocated into an occupational position. Usually this is based upon their previous occupation. This is completely unsatisfactory since the unemployed share a marginality to the world of work or to anything beyond the most rudimentary incomes. Many sociologists [see Garner, 2011; Evans & Tilley, 2015; Savage, 2015; Hanley, 2016; Bloodworth, 2016 and Evans & Tilley, 2016] still refer to certain urban areas as 'working class' despite the fact that almost nobody is engaged in paid employment and most households subsist on benefits. The unemployed are better conceptualized as a separate category and positioned at the base of the ladder/gradient/hierarchy. This would allow for the exploration of their class position far more effectively. The positioning of the unemployed as a separate socio-economic category was advocated by Rose and O'Reilly (1997 and 1998) in their Socio-Economic Classification for the ONS. However, this insight has rarely been applied in subsequent empirical research in the field of social stratification.

Part II

The Case for New Approaches

There is a strong case for a different set of questions and empirical research in the field of social stratification. These should include studies of the capitalist class [owners]. Traditionally this had been an area of sociological inquiry most

³ An exception is the work of McGovern et al (2007) which attempted to incorporate some of these issues into their analysis of the *Working in Britain* survey.

⁴ It also remains silent about 'unpaid' work, including home care and voluntary/community work.

notably in the successive publications of Scott [1979, 1991 and 1997] but in more recent times it has almost completely disappeared from view. There has been something of a resurgence of macro-sociological studies into the changing share of income accruing to capital [see Kim *et al*, 2015 and Ó'Rain *et al*, 2015] but this has tended to be highly abstract and not related to broader issues in social stratification. In the field of research into the football industry, for example, there is a conspicuous gap in the sociological literature: the owners of football clubs have rarely been studied systematically. Rather sociologists of sport continue to publish books about football hooliganism despite its virtual disappearance from British games [see Spaaij, 2006; Stott & Pearson, 2007 and Pearson, 2014]. There is also a pressing need to explore the contemporary 'petty bourgeoisie'. There are over 5.2 million owners of small businesses in Britain who currently employ over 25 million people [see Rhodes, 2015]. There are also 28 million owners of small businesses currently in the USA [see US Small Business Administration, 2015] and their class situation merits future research. Such research could incorporate a wide variety of methods, including surveys, interviews and ethnography. Indeed, it is an area ripe for participant observation. The focus should be on the market and work situation of owners of small businesses and how these differ from that of skilled manual workers from where many originate, as well from the salariat and from owners of large businesses.

More research should also be undertaken in the world of work where all these schemes are rooted. There is a need to incorporate the emergence of new occupations as well as the transformation of traditional occupations within the division of labour. Nobody today would restrict their approach exclusively to males or to factory workers. That said there is a paucity of empirical sociological analyses of contemporary factories, despite the centrality factory production has had over the sociological imagination for over a century [see Beynon *et al*, 2002].

Employment and work in the sphere of logistics has been a neglected terrain within contemporary economic sociology [see Penn, 2015 and 2016]. In traditional images of work and stratification jobs outside 'production' have been seen as far less worthy of attention than what takes place in factories. This is

rooted in Marxist assumptions about the nature of the working class⁵ and beliefs about radical/revolutionary action. Clearly the logistical systems whereby commodities manufactured or assembled in factories arrive in consumer markets are central to modern economies. These systems are global in their scope. The worlds of transport and distribution urgently require detailed empirical research set within a wider stratification matrix. The global nature of activity requires, in all probability, globally-based research teams. Closer links with Chinese sociology could and should be central to this.

Occupations like nursing and administrative work also warrant greater attention. Nursing has been an area where technological change has significantly impacted upon the content of work, professional accountability and the nature of occupational boundaries, particularly in relation to the medical profession [see Scrivener, *et al*, 2011]. These expanded and advanced roles include a wide range of responsibilities such as prescribing medication, insertion of IV lines for treatment [cannulation] and pre-operative assessment and patient discharge amongst others [Royal College of Nursing, 2012]. Much of the change has been incremental but nonetheless profound. Its contours lie in the front line of the current crisis of medical provision in advanced societies and particularly in Britain [see Coombs, 2004 and Numerato *et al*, 2011]. There is a need for detailed research into this terrain using a wide variety of methods.

Administrative work has also changed enormously over recent decades. Universities provide an excellent example. The proportion of university staff in administrative cadres has expanded rapidly unlike the proportion of academics. Increasingly the professional status of academics is challenged by external and internal bureaucratic control systems. This mirrors the classic conflict between professionals and managers within manufacturing plants that was catalogued in great detail a generation or so ago [see Dalton, 1950 and Sorensen & Sorensen, 1974]. The changing boundaries of occupations within the university sector throws into doubt classic formulations and distinctions.

New styles of research would be valuable. Too much stratification research has become overly statistical and technical. Case studies and qualitative research have much to offer. For instance, visual methods offer the possibility of

⁵ These include the labour theory of value which mistakenly argues that only workers engaged in production create value.

innovative approaches to the study of structured inequalities. The visual has been marginal to social science until very recently [see M. Jay 1994)]. Most sociology is almost exclusively lexical in nature. Evidence is generally derived from observation, fieldwork, surveys and conventional lexemic approaches. However, Harper [1987] in a seminal piece of research used photographs as the centrepiece for his sociological study of a small workshop [*Working Knowledge: Skill and Community in a Small Shop*]. This pioneering study revealed the strengths of utilizing visual data to support a wider sociological argument about class and stratification. Harper's use of photographs was not simply illustrative. The photographs represented the world of work in a small workshop and his images portrayed the light, the tools, the spaces and the textures of work, thereby revealing an interconnected environment. The photographs became an interface for Harper to gain insights from his main respondent. Harper termed this method 'photo elicitation'. Over a period of time as his respondent studied the images, Harper learned not to fill the silence with what he thought were helpful prompts but learned to trust his respondent's absorption of the visual information and his subsequent descriptions of the work process. In Harper's account the visual images generated novel and distinctive patterns of thinking in a dialectical fashion [see Harper, 2002].

However, this approach is by no means the only way visual data on stratification could be collected and analyzed. Reiger (1996, 2003 and 2011) used rephotography as way of probing social change in rural Upper Michigan and Vergara (1999 and 2011) rephotographed urban locations to reveal long term urban decline and decay. This approach could usefully be used in longitudinal research into changes in patterns of structured inequalities over time. In particular, it would be useful to calibrate changes in the sphere of work over time and how these have impacted upon class relations using video technology.

Archival photographs could also be used. Margolis (2004) examined archival photographs set in Native American boarding schools between the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century and Grady (2007) explored the depiction of Black Americans in *Life* magazine between 1936 and 2000 to probe changing aspects of American racism. This method could be used to explore and analyze many aspects of social stratification. There are excellent archival resources about the worlds of work and class. These include a wide range of

materials held by the BBC and the BFI, some of which are listed in the appendix to this paper.

These could be compared with the contemporary situation through the generation of such visual data by sociologists themselves. A contemporary sociological film about the world of manufacturing, for example, would reveal a great deal about the dynamics of the world of work and the wider stratification context. In an ideal world such methods would dovetail and interact with others sources of data that are lexical in nature. Sociologists can collect and create photographs or videotext as part of a longitudinal research strategy relatively easily nowadays [See Chaplin, 2011 and Klett, 2011].

Sociologists can also involve their participants/respondents in producing photographs themselves within a research project. One strategy would involve inviting participants to photograph what they consider to be valuable or important about their world of work or, more imaginatively, the visual markers of their position [and others] in the stratification system. These images can then be used subsequently to provide an 'entry point' into their wider 'life-worlds' within a process of dialectical conversations. Once this is repeated at some time[s] afterwards there is a fulcrum with which to explore changes [and continuities] over time.

Conclusions

This paper has examined the case for the enduring relevance of class analysis. This approach went out of fashion for a series of contingent reasons but the continued salience of 'class' models whether from a Weberian or Marxist perspective has been outlined. The central problem of most contemporary stratification research is that the focus on occupations renders central aspects of inequality invisible despite them being visible in plain sight. In particular, the owners of capital rather than labour disappear from analytic concerns. Furthermore, households without occupations also disappear in an occupational sleight of hand! There is a resulting paradox. The most advantaged and the least advantaged economically both disappear from view and the resulting research is limited to debates about the nature and effects of occupational differences rather than the wider structure of social inequalities.

The paper has also suggested the adoption of broader methods of data collection. In particular, visual methods offer an exciting set of new possibilities in the field.

Appendix A: Videos on Work and Employment

***All Our Working Lives* BBC4 2009 [Originally 1984]**

***All Our Working Lives Revisited* BBC4 [2010]**

***Portrait of a Miner* BFI [2009]**

***At the Coal Face* Panamint [2005]**

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