



# Thinking about Class

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## Abstract

Social classes are changing as people move around the world more often, moving more frequently between different class systems, holding different positions in different places, and changing the meanings of class, and social classes are also changing as rising economic insecurity reduces established certainties. The continued worldwide emancipation of women and rising income and wealth inequalities all change how we see ourselves and treat others. We are also changing how we wish to be grouped and seen. The BBC class survey (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-22000973>) and the article published simultaneously in *Sociology* (Savage et al., 2013) have generated considerable public discussion in the media but that debate is still largely parochially British. A public debate was initiated over how class is defined and about the relevance of social class in the contemporary world. Contributors ranging, in occupational class terms, from celebrity comics to the elite of the intellectual commentariat began to re-engage with the importance of social class as an explanatory concept. But if class matters as much as we now think it does we need to know how it is changing and how we can help change it for the better.

## Keywords

capitalism, class, conceptualizing

*... we need to think more carefully about how we think about ourselves as social individuals and as social groups, about how our forebears thought about themselves, and about how our successors might think about themselves.*

(Cannadine, 2000: 189)

Do we really? Don't we largely know what we think? How can we predict the future? Why should we think even more carefully about how we think about how we are grouped? After all, might there be better uses of our time and more useful things we could think carefully about, other things that we had not thought enough about already? But, if social classes are changing, then perhaps thinking about them yet again might be fruitful.

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In April 2013, a group of academics followed Professor Cannadine's advice. Furthermore, they did not just think more about class as it applied to them, or the class of others, but about how others might think more about class. Through working with the BBC they encouraged a great many others in Britain to think about what class they might each fall into. Their report came out during a particularly slow news-week in Britain and was widely covered (BBC, 2013). Few recent academic studies or papers can have had as much immediate impact (Savage et al., 2013).

Class is something most of us who are interested in the subject already think we have a good understanding of, although we probably know that most others don't agree with many of our particular ideas about class. The rest of us, that majority of humans who are not much interested in esoteric discussions of class, are unlikely to think that 'we' should think more carefully about class at all. Others might think that we already think too much about class!

Talking to other people who live elsewhere in Europe I am often told that writing about class feeds the English obsession with class. By continuing to talk about it, people feel that is a relevant and important subject, that old-fashioned class systems' more subtle distinctions do still matter, rather than being an outdated idea in a more mixed up world where you are now most separated into separate social classes simply by how much money you have. Often this results in greater spatial separation as that money buys differing locations and your postcode begins to reveal more and more about you. Your postcode is the unhidden part of your wealth.

Social class in Britain is clearly no longer neatly defined by occupation. The same occupation label can conceal a wide range of incomes. People of the same income can have access to widely varying resources of wealth, so knowing income alone is no longer enough. Class is no longer simply a vertical ranking linked to capital and a system of production in some way. Someone can now more easily have multiple class identities. What class is a university graduate working in a call centre reading scripts from the screen, renting with friends but expecting some 'help' with a mortgage from their parents in later middle age?

Compared to how accent, dress, first name and even surname can still reveal so much about who you are in Britain, most European societies have to some extent overcome many of the restrictions of older class systems. They have not necessarily become 'better' places or rid themselves of the associated problems in society. But what has happened in most other parts of Europe and the world is that a revolution or invasion has abruptly disrupted what were traditional class systems; by comparison, the gradual loss of its global hegemonic status has not had so much impact on Britain. The same schools, same established church, same universities, same classes, still dominate as they did some time ago, but under that façade of immobility there are changes afoot.

A hierarchy where wealth and income increasingly matter more than education, ethnicity, accent, dress, or religion is not better, but it is easier to reduce class divisions based mostly on money by promoting redistribution rather than teaching elocution. Across almost all of the rest of Europe income inequalities are lower than in Britain. Thus in Britain so often someone's address tells you more about who they are. This is not just true of London, but within any British city. As I have migrated around the country and been repeatedly told that I have just arrived in a very unequal place, I have gradually

come to realize that almost all British cities are similarly unequal in terms of the gaps between rich and poor (Dorling, 2014). In most of the rest of the rich world, excluding Singapore and the USA, cities are less segmented, and that must have an effect on who we are and how we think for those of us who have grown up and lived in the more divided places and times.

When David Cannadine was ending his popular book on class (where the opening quotation was drawn from), he appeared not to have been thinking of most of his potential readers as being part of the ‘we’ he was addressing. Or maybe he was inviting them into that particular group by writing as he did? Welcoming readers into his inner circle of thinking, as a reward for having made it to p. 189? Professor Cannadine may have been being realistic; only other academics might be expected to get to the end of his book?

Class matters because it often feels as if it is the modern day truth of our identity. We cannot escape it. It becomes a little differently defined in different times and places, but we have always had classes. Today, resources are distributed according to our current organizational principles of opportunity hoarding and exploitation. Earlier religions and belief systems produced rankings dissimilar to contemporary classes, but crucially they still produced ranks and – to try to answer David Cannadine’s question about how our successors might think about themselves – at some point they won’t have our classes but I suspect they’ll still rank each other.

Like most mammals, human beings are animals influenced by issues of rank but, unlike other animals, humans have built rank up as the centrepiece of many of their belief systems, of their religions and societies (Toynbee et al., 2009). Wolves, chimps, bats and badgers exhibit behaviour that reveals rank structures. For humans, class is so much part of our being that even as we write about it we may not be aware of how we are performing it, demonstrating both our class and our awareness of others.

As David Cannadine’s words reveal, when the most distinguished of contemporary historians of class writes, she or he can reveal her or his perception of class through the nuances of language; and some might argue that this also reveals parts of his or her class identity, class position, and class beliefs. Comedy is often used to puncture class pretensions; semi-colons for instance, have been defined as a punctuation symbol which you use to let your readers know you have been to university.

Someone (like me) who uses words like ‘nuance’ in a sentence, or who uses a semi-colon to separate clauses, is choosing to write this way, and there is a danger that writing like this belittles you, the reader. You read my words and, rather than think about what I am saying, you think about how you don’t talk or write like I do. Alternatively, you may be thinking about how much more clearly you, with your superior education, might have expressed my thoughts and have done so much better than I can. But what is better?

Writing posh enough (in a sufficiently up-market way) to be allowed to be published, but not so much as to be unintelligible to those you are most interested in talking to requires a particular style of writing and a particular kind of class thinking. Class is always there; it is what is all pervasive, and what lies beneath. You are classifying me as you read these words, and I have classified you as I make assumptions about you in writing them. I assume that if you have read this far you are intrigued about what I may believe, or what I’ll reveal of my class.

If you think this a little unfair, looking at writing and talking and making judgments, then think of how we can now pigeonhole each other so much more by recognizing that where we live gives away where we come from. In much of the UK, without some inheritance from wealthy parents or grandparents you cannot possibly get a mortgage almost no matter how well you 'perform' occupationally. In some ways we are returning to a gilded age where family wealth matters more. Classes in the future in the UK could be less about what we do and more about where we are from.

Many academics do not realize the extent to which housing is expensive everywhere. Interestingly, two of the anonymous referees of this paper suggested that mine was a somewhat London-centric view because away from the capital housing is cheaper and hence less of a 'reveal' of your position. However, it is not cheaper for most people, just for people like academics still mostly paid on national pay scales. Nevertheless, in the former polytechnic of a former mill town the academic may be a property tycoon, whereas employed in one of the capital's most exclusive central universities she could be just another bottom feeder of the wildly fluctuating rental market.

The current classes we recognize are classes of the machine age, of cities, of the age we think of as modern. We call these 'social classes' as if they were cast in stone, as if they were akin to taxa of species, but they are only a very recent rank ordering and they will soon be replaced in their turn. The older social classes that predated our current occupational hierarchy we now call castes. It did not take long after the start of industrialization to recognize that it was the machines which made current class systems so different from the agricultural class systems before them: 'The soil grows castes; the machine makes classes' (Young, 1958: 21). Today, the market, in people, property and prestige is producing something new.

Older caste divisions become untenable outside of rural village settings, in places where the order of things is not replicated generation after generation. Just as with classes, people do not fit naturally into castes, and castes are not a natural division of humanity. Farming in the North China plain was carried out successfully for millennia without the kinds of caste systems that other agricultural societies developed (Frank and Gills, 2006). Just like classes today, castes yesterday and castes elsewhere were just as contingent on their times and places.

Our current class divisions became established as societies industrialized. Relationships began to be more clearly ordered, primarily around the connections between people and the machine, and between people in connection with how they related to machines. Capitalists' classes concern the divisions between the interests of those who owned the machines and those who were forced to operate them. These classes become untenable outside of factory-town settings, or when the machines are sent abroad (industries off-shore), but they form the majority of class systems in operation today as across the planet more people live in cities than villages and more work in factories than ever before.

Our current classes are often seen as classes of free-market capitalism, but it is not the market that is important in defining them. Markets have existed for millennia (Lohmann, 2009), as have bosses and servants, slaves and masters. What is new is capitalism, and what made capitalism so new were the machines. Without machines being built to harness the power of carbon, initially through coal, we would not have been able to

transform our world so much in such a short time, and in doing so reorder our societies so dramatically.

A recent British Prime Minister had a good point to make when she wrote that currently ‘Class is a Communist concept. It groups people as bundles, and sets them against each other’ (Thatcher, 1992). That doesn’t mean the concept was wrong, communists’ conceptualizations can sometimes be spot on, but as capitalism changes so will class. It was not the concept that sets people against each other, it is being bundled into groups, now largely by dint of your family’s wealth, which does this, and it was the recognition that people were being set against each other in this way that helped define the current concept, the concept that is now being contested.

Part of what the BBC ‘Great British Class Survey’ of April 2013 set out to do was to help the definitions of class to be changed again. Its two key authors suggest they were influenced by Bourdieu, Marx, Giddens, Weber and E.P. Thompson, by complexity theory, assemblages, emergences, feminist arguments, and by what they call dis-identification, in a way which its proponents suggest brings out the ‘relationality’ of class (Savage and Devine, 2013). They were probably influenced by being British too, and by where they were working, as much as the academic and historical context in which they were writing.

I think the Great British Class Survey’s authors’ description of what they were trying to do may be a little opaque, but their somewhat confusing and perhaps confused description of how they came to define the seven BBC classes does a great job of both illustrating how classes may be changing, and of how we go about recognizing our changing group identities. We stumble around with different ideas until we settle on a new description of conceptions of who we are that fits and fits so well that we no longer think of it as an idea. ‘It’s obvious isn’t it?’ can only be said once someone has made their description appear that way.

The BBC Great Class Survey started off by rejecting occupational labels as being useful to assess class. After all, it sometimes appears that half the (employed) population of Britain has ‘manager’ as part of their job title today. However, that same BBC classification, in its ‘Social Capital’ section, then used what respondents wrote about the occupations of their acquaintances in its assessment of everyone’s class. It is worth taking the class test yourself if you have not done so already (BBC, 2013).

Clicking on the limited selection of occupations that your social acquaintances might be involved in results in your status rising, but only if you reveal you are hobnobbing within some categories. Your class position is then reduced if you are acquainted with any of the lower echelons. You do, however, get a higher score for variety. The ‘Cultural Capital’ section of the Survey divides activities into ‘emerging’ and ‘highbrow’. All this could be seen as reinforcing stereotypes. It has certainly attracted more than a little humour, which is one traditional antidote to class labeling and stigmatizing.

Writing in the *Independent* newspaper, comedian Mark Steel got to the crux of what appeared not to work in the new survey and why it was too reassuring to people who thought they were at the top of society:

One question the survey didn’t seem to bother asking was what job you did, although it does ask for the jobs of your friends. So if you’re a cleaner who knows some teachers, that makes

you middle class for having teacher friends, but those teachers will be working class for having a friend who's a cleaner. (Steel, 2013)

The history of using humour to try to burst the bubbles of apparent certainty created by those who try to classify us may be as long as the history of class itself.

A series of spoofs appeared on the popular website *The Poke* (2013), suggesting what kinds of responses were needed within the BBC Great Class Survey to imply that someone was of the 'Insect Overlord' class ('the wealthiest and most privileged group') or the 'Drug Dealer' class ('this class group sells drugs to everyone'). Various cartoonists had fun, including Martin Rowson (2013) who suggested the seven new classes being proposed were actually 'our wise and beautiful masters', who were followed in turn by 'decent middle England', 'striving if frankly oikish', 'ever so slightly deserving scum', 'undeserving scum', 'freakshow scum', and, finally, 'expendable'.

The classes that best define us are changing as we change and as the political, economic and social structures that surround us change. Machine-based capitalism has been around for just over half a dozen generations; it appears to be slowing down (Dorling, 2013). It is stunning to discover that such a short time is long enough to form the bedrock of the class labels we most commonly allocate each other today: working, middle and upper.

One of the greatest changes under our current system is the changing class position of women. This is occurring as we no longer produce so many humans; machines have become so much more productive than people. Moving out of our current class system will see a further transformation of the position of women. Just under a decade ago it was possible to suggest that '... Women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property' (MacKinnon, 2006: 21). It would be harder to find statistics today which showed that this situation was not changing in parts of the world. Established gender divisions become less untenable as individual women have fewer children, and more of us live on our own more often and for longer. In many parts of the world today women live longer than men. Before our current class system was established that was not the case. Across Britain, and in many similar countries, young women are now often better qualified than young men. Our current class system is beginning to change.

Other ways in which we group each other into particular types of classes are also being radically transformed. Racial categorization can be most acute, when seen geographically, in the city and its quarters. It was in the city that ghettos were first formed, a long time ago, but only since the 1960s has the word 'racism' appeared frequently in English dictionaries and the word 'racist' is even more recent (Leech, 2005: 1–5).

Like poverty, racism has not always been with us and, also like poverty, only recently have large numbers of people become committed to its eradication (Goldberg, 2009: 370). The extent of racism, of any prejudicial effects of any categorization of humans, can be measured by premature mortality, as first suggested by Ruthie Gilmore (Dorling, 2010: 170). Sociologists often confuse issues of hierarchy and dominance by imagining a complex intersectionality of race/ethnicity, gender and class as defined by cultural and economic capital, topped up with spatial disadvantage or spatial profit producing, at the extremes, underclasses and over-classes. Often on the ground how you are viewed and

treated is not as hard to understand as is imagined in the classroom. Over-analyzing can obfuscate.

Seeing categorization of people as problematic and the widening of gaps between classes as problematic is also very much in vogue today. Economists argue with sociologists and social statisticians to claim that social mobility is either rising or falling. Order your classes by occupation job titles alone and mobility may be rising, especially when you take into account the older ages at which middle-class parents tend now to become parents. Why do academics still insist on producing schemes that place themselves so very high up in the rankings?

Order your classes by income quartile or quintile and mobility may then be found to be falling in Britain. Academics may also be ranked a little more lowly by income or wealth measures than by their pompous job titles (*mea culpa*) and affectations, including in places an insistence on the continued use of Latin phrases. The reason why academics are having these debates may be more interesting than the debates themselves. Observers from outside Britain are often perplexed as to why the British, including British academics, appear to be so obsessed by class. Some suggest that the British partly perpetuate class divisions by constantly remarking on them. However, thinking about how we inherit some institutions in a different way from elsewhere in the world might help to explain why our particular manifestations of classes appear so odd. For example, of all the rich countries in the world only Britain has a private school sector serving just 7 per cent of children by costing a quarter of all we spend, publicly and privately, on secondary education (Reay, 2012). Nowhere else in Europe, or Japan, or even the USA comes close to the educational divisions seen in terms of funding per child in the UK.

From the stage before we had a written history we have had social classes of one kind or another. One school of thinking has it that human rankings began to differ from the rankings of other mammals as humans began to use weapons. From then on people evolved almost symbiotically with weapons and killing; just as humans also evolved alongside their hallucinogenic aids to thinking, so too they evolved alongside their weapons. Thinking about our ancient past helps us to see that all of us are the same; we all have very similar problems, potentials and abilities. We all come with varying baggage and degrees of freedom. We developed classes over the course of millennia.

We may have, in effect, been influenced by nature to be inclined to take drugs to assist our imaginations and have also evolved to use weapons to kill one another. Worryingly high proportions of ancient skeletons are found with wounds to their bones typical of having been murdered, but people change (Pinker, 2012), which is why their classification is not easy. We can increase our use of hallucinogenics and decrease our use of violence. Our patterns of behaviour, just like our class, are not locked into our genes.

The weapon, especially the spear, allows a group of smaller people to kill a larger, stronger, person. Weapons made human hierarchies more subtle, and to reflect more than simply upper body strength. We continue to this day to try to understand what it is that connects our evolutionary heritage to our current social outcomes. What is it deep within ourselves that makes us so resistant to being looked down upon and so damaged when we are (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009)? What is it within a few of us that means some want so very much to look down on others and feel superior? When the pro-social majority gain the upper hand the antisocial individualistic minority are often forced to hide

their feelings, but they may always be there and it is when the individualists gain the upper hand that class comes to matter most (Van Lange et al., 2012).

The furore over the Great British Class Survey came to a sudden end, almost as fast as it welled up, on 8 April 2013. In the early hours of 8 April an elderly women was found to have died, alone, in an exclusive London hotel. On 17 April she was buried. The readings at her funeral included these claims: ‘We recall with great gratitude her leadership of this nation ... she did what she believed to be for the common good’ (*The Telegraph*, 2013). And it became so important to talk about her that the British stopped talking about class, although a few mentioned her class and suggested she had ‘done well’.

The photograph below was taken on the day of Margaret Thatcher’s funeral. But it is taken at the site of a memorial to an earlier prime minister. The note attached to the flowers, and reproduced beneath the photograph, reflects how class changed in Britain in the years up to when that younger man, Harold Wilson, came to find himself at that most elite of posts. However, the seeds of equality sown during the 1960s did not result in a new, far less class-bound society. Something new emerged in the 1970s ... as the classes began to change. But that something, which initially heralded in greater equality, could be the start of a much greater change. As Professor Cannadine made clear at the end of his book in the quotation that began this short note – we need to think about our successors. That is what memorials to the dead are for – they are notes to our successors.



**Figure 1.** Note at the site of a memorial to an earlier prime minister.

The note reads ‘On the day of the pompous and prodigal funeral of a greatly overrated Prime Minister this is a simple and respectful tribute to a greatly underrated Prime Minister who sowed the seeds of equality, fairness and compassion in our country and whose crucial contributions are not acknowledged even by his own party.’ Photograph taken by Dimitris Papadimitriou, Professor of Politics, University of Manchester.



The world was changing in Britain when Harold Wilson became prime minister. It was the swinging sixties. During his second term of power, class structure was changing quickly too, especially during that summer of love of 1967. The *Small Faces* sang that year to a chorus of 'it's all too beautiful' ... that all would be fine and you too, 'You can miss out school (won't that be cool) ... Why go to learn the words of fools?'. The young were beginning to dream different dreams from those of the old, and they were beginning to mix better socially between classes. Many of their futures would not be based on working on machine production lines all their adult lives. But they were not about to be set free.

Inequalities began to rise again from the late 1970s in both the UK and USA. In those countries individualists won the upper hand. Forty years later, Robert Frank, Ben Bernanke's co-writer of economic textbooks, explained to people in the USA (Frank, 2007) that when inequality rises even those in the middle tend to fall towards the bottom. Rosanne joked that in the USA you were middle class until they cut the power because you could no longer pay the bills.

How we think about class *changes as we change*. The classes we created changed us too. We need to think about ourselves, and about the past, but much more about how 'successors might think about themselves'. Unlike us, our successors might well make their own history under self-selected circumstances (Marx, 1963[1852]), and that will in its turn change the very idea of class, not just the classes themselves.

Finally, there is the possibility that as our postcodes begin to define us more tightly we begin to reject many of these ways of labeling people by where they are from. All forms of labeling, as they become more important, begin to elicit a counter, a rejection. The singer Ian Brown described being northern by explaining 'It's not where you're from, it's where you're at' that matters; it is your state of mind and how you think, he claimed, that makes you northern or southern in Britain – but that was 1988.

By 2005 Ian put it like this, 'The place I'm at is totally happy' (Anon, 2005). From professors of history concluding their thoughts, to sociologists making an impact, to indie singers of the second summer of love, we all have an idea of what most matters when it comes to thinking about class, and where we'd like to be, and – as we articulate our ideas, depending on how we articulate our ideas – we change what most matters.

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