

What is the Question?

Review essay on Mike Savage et al (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century*, Pelican Books

Reviewed by Andrew Sayer

I imagine that readers of *Soundings*, like others who have a strong interest in politics and culture, will often think of British society in terms of the ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’, and perhaps the ‘upper class’ too. Indeed, for many of us, this is not merely a habit of thought; it reflects a strongly politicised attachment to such ways of thinking. And the wider British public is thoroughly familiar with this model too, even though many people consider class an outmoded concept.

So a book which tells us that there are now 7 classes, not 3, and in particular that there is no clear boundary between the working and middle classes, is likely to cause a stir. This is what *Social Class in the 21st Century* claims, and it’s well worth reading – consistently interesting and accessibly written. It summarizes a major study by a team of sociologists led by Mike Savage of LSE, based on a major online survey run by the BBC (‘The Great British Class Survey’), plus a smaller but more representative social survey, and a set of 50 interviews with people across a range of occupations.

Unusually for social research, with the aid of the BBC’s backing, the study received considerable publicity and reaction, even beyond the UK. The reactions were very mixed, even from the BBC itself; while some found the results intuitively plausible, many were bemused, uncomprehending and dismissive, and there was the usual undertow of British anti-intellectualism and suspicion of social research.

The aim of the study was to find out how best to group or classify people according to differences in their economic, cultural and social characteristics – to reveal groups ‘who share common lifestyles, identities, social networks and political orientations as well as levels of income and wealth’.

Older definitions of class, not only Marxist definitions (which were trying to explain something different), but also sociological classifications based on occupation, produce categories that increasingly fail to match up with individuals’ income and wealth, lifestyle and life chances. Knowing that someone is dependent on a wage or is a manager doesn’t reveal much about these things. In particular, neither sociologists nor the general public seem to be able to identify a clear boundary between the working class and the middle class. But as this book argues, this does not mean that class has lost its importance; on the contrary, it has not disappeared but changed shape.

Like many researchers in recent years, they draw upon the work of the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. This adopts a 3-dimensional approach to class in place of the old one-dimensional occupational models. Bourdieu’s particular interest was not primarily the economic influences on class but the cultural and social dimensions, the often-subtle ways that people classify themselves and others through their actions and ideas, creating hierarchies of worth. In short, individuals’ class is based on not only on their economic capital (income and wealth, including housing), but cultural capital (tastes and interests, particularly familiarity with cultural goods valued by the dominant), and social capital (social networks, connections and ties). He called them

capital because they bring their holders advantages vis-à-vis others. The concept of cultural capital is particularly useful for understanding inequality and ‘soft power’ in society – the advantages associated with an easy, confident familiarity with the cultural activities and goods associated with those at the top, and an ability to talk knowledgeably about them, can serve as a badge of membership in elite circles, provoking feelings of superiority and inferiority among people with more or less of such capital. Those at the bottom certainly do not lack culture, but they lack cultural capital because their cultural activities do not bring them advantages relative to others - on the contrary.

Having one kind of capital may help you get more of another – the cultural knowledge and tastes that play well in elite circles may allow you to increase your social capital, in turn helping you get a better paid job; but the three kinds of capital can also vary independently of one another. Crucially, this makes it possible to register that those who have similar amounts of economic capital – perhaps managers in the private sector and certain professionals in the public sector – may have different kinds of cultural and social capital, and thus different lifestyles, values and dispositions, and probably different political beliefs. The other distinctive feature of the approach is that it allows us to acknowledge *gradations* between classes; it doesn’t impose sharp boundaries where there are gradual transitions.

For Bourdieu, everyday social life is pervaded by largely unacknowledged competitions and struggles: competitions for valued goods, positions, experiences and activities; competitions and disagreements over *what* is of value – what counts as cultural capital, for example?; and competitions over whose views on what is of value

have authority. Someone from the traditional working class might value football above the theatre, but in an unequal society, her judgements are unlikely to count as much as those of the theatre-lover. There is no neutral standpoint outside this field of competition over value, and the playing field is far from level. So in trying to measure cultural capital, researchers face difficult choices over what to include. As Bourdieu observed, the meaning of class is part of what these struggles are about.

By getting information on individuals and indicators of their economic, social and cultural capital, the researchers were able to identify common clusters of these capitals that differentiate groups of people from others. The seven classes they found were:

- an 'elite', the top 6% in terms of income and cultural and social capital;
- an established middle class, with moderate economic, cultural and social capital;
- a technical middle class, reasonably well off but having very limited social capital;
- new affluent workers, reasonably well off but reporting only limited cultural engagements;
- a traditional working class with limited economic, social and cultural capital, though having more than the precariat;
- emerging service workers, with limited economic capital but moderate cultural capital;
- the precariat, in low paid and insecure work and supported by benefits, with little or no savings.

Though the lists runs from the most to the least advantaged in terms of economic capital, when one takes into account cultural and social capital too, it is not a simple hierarchy; for example, ‘the new affluent workers’ might be placed above the technical middle class. By far the most clearly distinguished from their adjacent classes are those at the extremes – the elite and the precariat - while the five classes in the middle shade into one another more, though there are nevertheless significant differences between their typical members. The elite’s mean income of £89k is almost double that of the next highest class, and their house prices and savings far exceed those of the rest. The precariat as defined here is more restricted than in Guy Standing’s usage¹, for it excludes those from more advantaged positions who happen to be in insecure employment. They have not only little economic capital or security, but very little cultural or social capital. They are also stigmatized - and are acutely aware of it.

In arriving at this classification it was found that in addition to traditional, highbrow cultural capital, a new kind of cultural capital is emerging. This is characterized by familiarity with a range of genres, from classical to pop, from skiing to football, and by confidence in moving between. ‘Cultural omnivores’ benefit from this, but significantly, it is largely the preserve of more educated people, and far from levelling class differences, it seems to be creating new ones.

The 7 classes differ in other ways. Given that it takes time to accumulate capital, especially economic capital, the elite and established middle class tend to be older and the emerging service class younger, though the traditional working class is also relatively old. Ethnic minorities straddle the traditional working/middle class divide:

they are under-represented in the elite, but well represented in the established middle class and the emerging service workers, as well as in the precariat; many had more cultural capital (particularly educational qualifications) than economic capital.

Although the book notes the persistence of gender inequalities it says little about how these relate to the 7 classes. Girls and women do better in education than boys and yet are quickly overtaken by men in earnings in the job market, so presumably one would expect men and women to be represented unequally across the classes. Is not our economic and social capital affected profoundly by whether we are male or female, single or coupled or divorced? And how does the structure of households affect individuals' class position? As for the geography of the 7 classes, while the elite are heavily localised in the London and the South-East, there is otherwise no simple north-south divide but a much more messy picture, in which urban-rural differences stand out, not just in economic capital, but in social and cultural capital.

Social mobility is a major topic in the book. Strangely, Savage is silent on downward mobility, even though unless the room at the top expands, upward mobility has to be matched by downward mobility. It rightly points out the dangers of the now popular concept of meritocracy, first highlighted by Michael Young, who coined the term as part of a critique. Yet Savage doesn't quite question the origins of 'merit'. Even aside from the limitations of concepts of intelligence, it misses how much intelligence and ability of many kinds are dependent on upbringing. Growing awareness of how plastic our brains are, particularly in our early years, implies that the unequal social influences that impinge on us from birth have a major effect on our abilities.

Consequently, even if inequalities were to arise purely through some kind of fair competition today, the resulting advantages and disadvantages would be passed on to

the next generation, so that subsequent competition would no longer be fair. And while ‘achievement’ may indeed be an important feature of the elite class, this is arguably more a consequence of membership than a cause.

There is a substantial and valuable chapter on higher education and class, with degrees playing an important role as part of cultural capital in class differentiation. The expansion of higher education in recent decades has not meant greater equality. *Where* you go to university matters hugely; their social composition varies systematically, with Oxbridge and a few London Universities far above the rest. Our universities are strikingly hierarchically ordered; a table locates them according to the economic and cultural capital of their graduates. What is sad about this situation is of course that people are liable to mistake capital for quality, the posh for the good, though the posh need not necessarily be good, and the good need not necessarily be posh. Even if students know this, they may realize that others will judge them according to how posh their university is rather than on the quality of their education.

The book is not only about the objective characteristics of the members of the 7 classes, but their subjective feelings about class and its associations. Here the book builds on a now major literature on the lived experience of class. Perhaps most interesting are the responses of those at the top and the bottom. The precariat were painfully aware of how they are (mis)read by others, and of how precisely those things being measured in the study – economic capital and cultural goods and values – were loaded against them. This loading wasn’t the product of bias in the study, but a reflection of how they work in society. With the partial exception of those at the top, there is great ambivalence about class – both an acute awareness of class signals, and

embarrassment and reluctance to talk about it, for fear of being seen as snobbish.

While this is not a new finding by any means, it's important to see through the refusals of the concept of class that are so common in British society, by recognizing that they are more an expression of discomfort about class inequalities than a denial of their existence.

There are many other interesting findings. One is that the participation in the online survey was dominated by those at or near the top, with scarcely any from the precariat; hence the need for an additional, more representative survey. It seems that while those at the bottom are already all too aware of their position, it is mostly those at the top who are curious about class and who can approach the topic happily. Many of the interviews bear this out. Another is that in addition to the gender pay gap in occupations, there is also a clear class pay gap, particularly in high status occupations, so that among lawyers, or medics or bankers, those who enter them with the most capitals tend to get the highest paid jobs.

It would be a shame if we found it impossible to think about class in any other way than a one-dimensional, 2 or 3 class model, at least if we're interested in class in terms of different capacities, lifestyles and dispositions. It's good to broaden out our assessment of economic inequalities beyond income to include wealth, particularly housing and savings, and in turn to go beyond economic to social and cultural inequalities, especially as the latter impact so deeply on the lived experience of inequality. As long as we're talking about class in the GBCS team's terms, as groupings of people with similar clusters of economic, social and cultural capital, then by and large, the conclusions stand. But all these forms of capital are outcomes of

processes and structures, many of which lie beyond the scope of the study, including structures that are the focus of other concepts of class. The problems start when they try to explain these outcomes, particularly where economic inequalities are concerned, and this takes us deeper into the politics of class.

It's here that we need concepts of class that deal with *relations* between people: buyer and seller, employer and employee, lender and borrower, landlord and tenant, carer and cared-for. Most of these are unequal in terms of power, and many allow one side to take advantage of this, free-riding on the efforts of the other. Nevertheless, social reality is far too messy for us to expect them to crystallise out into neat classes of the sociological kind, not least because the amounts of money acquired within them and work done can vary considerably – a small time employer may get less than a top employee of a big firm – but also because each of us is likely to enter into more than one of these relations. But notwithstanding the messiness of the quantitative outcomes in terms of money, the qualitative relations matter because they raise questions of economic justice: are they fair? Do they involve unwarranted free-riding on others' labour? And what kind of effect do the economic practices have on people?

The book mentions rentiers twice, though only in passing and without providing a definition or explanation of their significance. Rentiers are recipients of unearned income, gained through controlling existing scarce assets that others need or want, such as property and money, and who can be charged for their use. Rentiers get a free lunch: something for nothing - wealth extraction without wealth creation. Like any free lunch it is at the expense of others, and of more productive uses of resources. It's both unjust and dysfunctional. Capital gains from rising property or share prices are

the classic example. The rise of neoliberalism has massively increased the size of rentier income, and it is particularly those at the top of the 1% who have made extraordinary gains through these means, enhancing their political power in the process. A parochial sociology that avoids getting into matters of economic relations misses this. In the terms of Bourdieu's approach, £1k of earned income (dependent on contributing in some way to the production of goods and services) is no different from £1k of unearned income. But from the point of view of economic justice, the difference is huge. The politics of class is not only about stigma, and feelings of superiority and inferiority, guilt or shame, important though these surely are, or indeed of social mobility, but the injustice of the economic relations which give people such arbitrarily different amounts of income, wealth and power in the first place.

One gets the impression that Savage has little time for such approaches to class. Extraordinarily, those that highlight exploitation are summarily dismissed as 'moralistic'. Much sociology has a strangely jaundiced yet contradictory view of ethical or moral judgement, dismissing it as merely 'subjective', or a matter of arbitrary conventions, while at the same time being rightfully concerned with the immorality and injustice of sexism, racism, homophobia and class contempt; there is a clear moral concern evident in the author's own discussions of class stigma. But at the same time, with one word, serious reasoning about economic justice that can inform the politics of class is dismissed.

Savage acknowledges the exceptional character of the top 1%, and as an object of concern, but he is insistent that we would do better to focus on the top 6%. He is

dismissive about reviving the concept of 'The Establishment'. The reasoning behind this is peculiar. On the one hand, this larger elite, many of whose members benefitted from the post-war boom and the salaries and housing market that came out of it, is indeed distinct from those below, and should be acknowledged as such. On the other hand, he notes that those at the very top get access to rentier sources of income, and notes the 'excessive rewards' of the super-rich. Yet he argues that a focus on the 1% would be about particular "'super-wealthy' individuals alone". But of course, it need not: it could more usefully address the sources and uses of their economic capital.² He also argues it would detract attention from the wider group they call the elite. But why should identifying these two groups be mutually exclusive? The numbers at the very top are small, to be sure, but their role in our current political economic system and its problems are huge. The hedge funder manager or the financial trader has far less in common with the rest of the elite than the elite has with the 6 classes below them.

The best question I've ever seen about class, was this one, from the US sociologist, Erik Olin Wright: 'if class is the answer, what's the question?' It's the right one because many arguments about class are at cross-purposes; they're actually between people who want to use the word for different purposes. A concept of class that tries to capture basic social relations of capitalism and a concept that tries to capture groupings of individuals with similar lifestyles and life chances are radically different things, so it's peculiar to expect either to do the job of the other, or to use one as the basis for rejecting the other. Nevertheless, there's a long history of sociologists, Marxists and others doing just that. And as capitalism has developed, the degree of correspondence between the division between labour and capital (central to Marxist approaches) and patterns of difference in lifestyles and life chances (central to

sociological approaches) has decreased. Further, with large numbers of dual earner households the relationship between individuals' employment and their wealth becomes weaker. So it's no surprise many people are not sure whether they are working class or middle class.

I suspect that the habit of thinking about class in terms of a 3-class model will die hard, but I suggest *Social Class in the 21st Century* offers us a better picture of the net outcomes of the economic and cultural processes that produce inequalities in Britain today. Nevertheless it doesn't take us back far into those processes and it largely avoids the issues of justice that need to be addressed in the politics of class.

¹ Guy Standing, 2011, *The Pecariat*, Bloomsbury

² Thomas Piketty, 2014, *Capital in the 21st Century*, Belknap, Harvard; Andrew Sayer, 2014, *Why We Can't Afford the Rich*, Policy Press