

Social Mobility and Education in England, A Multidisciplinary if not Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT Following a brief introduction, different models of social class hierarchy are presented in turn beginning with the traditional tripartite pyramid, through its possible development via upward, downward or relative social mobility between classes into a diamond or hourglass. However, the reversal of the previous century's limited upward social mobility into today's general downward social mobility, together with increasing social polarization widening the gap between the top and bottom of society, has had the effect that 'the class structure has gone pear-shaped' (Ainley and Allen 2010). This does not indicate a new class of the precariat growing in parallel to the existing social class structure, as suggested by Standing (2011). Instead, it is seen as a ratchetting up of what Marx called the Reserve Army of Labour (RAL) but not as a permanently unemployed so-called 'underclass', segregated from the rest of society. Rather, it is suggested that conditions of precarious employment are endured for longer by larger sections of the labour force. Particularly for new entrants to the labour market, increasingly extended transition to adulthood through full- and part-time education and training is intermitted with irregular employment. This process not only acclimatizes younger generations to the loss of security won by previous generations but differentiates them according to the qualifications obtained during their prolonged 'educational journey' to signal more or less expensively acquired cultural capital, the lack of which relegates them to lengthening, if not permanent, precarity. It gives the RAL a new form in conditions of general downward social mobility.

Keywords: Social class, social mobility, precarity, reserve army of labour, extended transition

Introduction

This paper presents various imaginary models of social class in contemporary England to illustrate how the social mobility that sociologically distinguishes class from caste is widely conceived and popularly presented. The promotion of upward social mobility through education has become vital to government policy ever since education substituted itself for economic policy in the 1980s. Since then government has no longer exercised very much control over the national economy as deregulation abandoned Keynesian controls over it to globalization. Other means of social mobility that are acknowledged as possible if not significant by social studies are not seen as within the purview of social policy. For instance, entrepreneurial success is celebrated but, like marriage (though most people find partners within their own class, even if those classes are narrowly defined), social mobility by these means is not seen as an area for

government intervention. The possibility of downward social mobility is also officially ignored. Perhaps because, in contrast to these other areas of social fluidity, education – at least in the state sector – is seen as something that government can do something about, so that effort has concentrated on universal access to an academic national curriculum. This was presented in 1988 as an entitlement in place of comprehensive schooling. Old Labour's slogan of equal opportunities through its comprehensive schools was thus translated from Mrs Thatcher onwards into equal opportunities to become unequal through performance in standardized testing and examination from earlier until later and later years, supplemented until recently by widening access to higher education. This procession of social imaginaries begins with the traditional social class pyramid that still arguably provides the template upon which other class conceptions are laid in popular imagination, even if its reality has been subjected to considerable transformation.

Pyramid

The traditional social class pyramid in England was stabilized over the 30 years of post-war economic development. The simple scheme of 'upper', 'middle' and 'working' classes corresponded (Bowles and Gintis 1976) with divisions of labour and knowledge in employment and education that appeared almost natural to those who were born into them. The employed population was divided between manual and non-manual labour, the latter subdivided into 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers. (Whether in reality there were only two classes of employers and employees masked by the mediating 'middle' term was a matter of academic and political debate.) In education, the state secondary schooling established by the 1944 Education Act prepared the male workforce via grammar schooling for management and professional occupations, whilst secondary technical schooling was intended for skilled manual work with secondary moderns for the mass of unskilled manual labour. The private schools then as now were remote from the state system but attended by c.7% of children; so they were not restricted to the much smaller than 7% 'upper' or 'ruling' class but included also at least some of the not so clearly defined 'middle' – 'the upper middle' perhaps. Another anomaly in the apparently simple pyramid model was that its solid base over-represented the numbers at the very bottom of society and, since it was technically a graph, should therefore have been presented as more of an onion than a triangular shape.

The solidity of the social pyramid was leavened by limited upward social mobility from mainly skilled sections of the 'respectable' working class across the great divide from manual jobs to non-manual careers in the expanding middle class. As Ken Roberts explained (2011, 186):

'the middle class was growing in size, which in itself increased the likelihood of those born into the middle class remaining in this class... Up to 1920 around three-quarters of sons born into the working class remained in that class. Amongst those born after 1950 it was just 50 per cent: the other 50 per cent had risen, at least into the intermediate class.'

As a consequence:

'by the 1950s a half of working class children were rising out of that class: typically one of the two children in a two child family. [Thus] Most working class parents in the second half of the twentieth century would have seen at least one of their children ascend at least to the intermediate class.'

This limited upward social mobility was largely what sociologists call ‘absolute’, so that more people moved up; it was not ‘relative’, so that, as the comparative inequalities between different classes declined, more people would also move down, allocated to their appropriate place via appropriate provision of education. This didn’t happen. So the occupational order did not become less of a pyramid and more of a diamond shape, as more moved into the middle through upward social mobility while corresponding numbers moved downward. They didn’t. There was, however, as Selina Todd (2014) pointed out, a long-term decline in the size of the manual working class, from well over two-thirds of employees in 1951 who were still manual workers to just over half by 1979. The non-manual working middle class of employees expanded proportionately.

It is important to retain this history because, contrary to Conservative mythology, comprehensive schools did not bring the post-war period of limited absolute upward social mobility to an end. Therefore returning to selective grammar schooling will not restore it. Rather, for a time after 1965 onwards when comprehensive schools began to be officially introduced, they ensured supply continued to meet demand – at least until the demand dried up. This is clearly seen by comparing the USA during the same period, where all-through comprehensive high schools had existed since the Second World War, but where similarly limited absolute upward social mobility also ended in the late 1970s (Aronowitz 2008). High school graduates, but also more and more university graduates, were then left ‘all dressed up but with nowhere to go’.

Hourglass or pear

At the beginning of the 21st century however, while the ‘middle’ continues to be the focus of attention, the context is very different with Goos and Manning (2003, 2) proposing that the drift towards either ‘lovely’ or ‘lousy’ jobs has been at the expense of those in the middle. This ‘hollowing out of the middle’ has followed the increasing use of computerised technology that, together with globalised outsourcing and downsizing, has allowed the automation of more and more ‘routine’, non-manual jobs. How this impacts on social class was discussed in The Work Foundation’s *The hourglass and the escalator* (Sissons 2011), which, like Goos and Manning, endorses ‘the hollowing out’ idea, ‘increasing polarisation in the labour market’:

‘During the recession, and the seven years before it, occupations which have lost the largest number of jobs tend to be in middle wage routine manual and non-manual occupations. For men this has meant the loss of significant numbers of jobs in process, plant and machine operative occupations; for women it has meant large-scale reductions in the numbers working in administrative and clerical occupations.’ (Sissons 2011, 30)

The ‘hollowing out of the middle’, especially traditional clerical and skilled manual jobs, has, according to the hourglass idea, been compensated for by a growing demand for traditional managers and professionals and new ‘higher middle’ designers and technicians, as well as by a new group of ‘para-professionals’ in the upper half of the hourglass. In other words, the hourglass is essentially symmetrical, with high-level skilled employment in the top half matched by low-level unskilled employment in the bottom. The problem is the pinch-point in the middle blocking any upward social mobility from the bottom to the top half of the hourglass. It should be noted, however, that an hourglass or egg-timer is incipiently pear-shaped since the sand inside it runs out from the top, emptying it so as to fill the bottom half of the glass.

If the occupational order is taken the basis of the class structure (following Parkin 1972, 18), then levels of pay provide the main indication of a person's 'market situation'. Here, arguments for the hourglass model run into trouble because income data show less of an hourglass and more of a pear. According to the Hills report (2010), there is not the clumping of income around the top 30-40% of the incomes ladder that an hourglass structure would indicate. Instead, after high returns to the top 5%, weekly earnings tail off gradually, producing a situation where the majority of the population remain in a relatively narrow income band near the base of what is a pear-shaped distribution. This coincides with the shape of the Hills report's income curves, and implies also that income inequalities are producing a pear-shaped class structure as a result of this general 'pushing down' of income levels at the same time as there is heightened polarisation away from the mean by those at the top.

Lansley (2012) alleged that in the UK (as well as in the USA), the squeezing of middle incomes, but also the increased impoverishment of those at the bottom, have followed from the policies of centre right governments prioritising reducing inflation over promoting growth. The Cameron-Osborne 'austerity plan' intensified these trends until a partial recovery was engineered as the 2015 general election approached. In the USA, the mild reflationary policies of the Obama administration created higher rates of growth and many more jobs earlier in the cycle, but wage increases are also yet to return to pre-downturn levels. President Obama regards as 'the defining challenge of our time ... a dangerous and growing inequality and lack of social mobility that has jeopardised middle-class America's basic bargain that if you work hard you've got a chance to get ahead'. (Whitehouse web site 4/12/2013)

The UK equivalent is what Ed Miliband called 'the British promise' that every generation will be better off than their parents (in a speech to parents in Gateshead, 4 February 2011). In his 29 March 2015 speech promising undergraduate fee reductions to £6,000 in the run-up to the 2015 general election, he promoted the measure as avoiding 'a disaster for the future of Britain' because 'a country where the next generation is doing worse than their parents is the definition of a country in decline'. For the first time, it looks as if this 'British promise' will not be fulfilled due primarily to intractable economic crisis aggravated by climate as well as demographic change (fewer in the younger generations to care for more in the older generation who are also living longer), especially if – as the pear-shaped class structure implies – the limited upward social mobility of the last century has given way to general downward social mobility in this century.

This means that there is no floor for the next tier down from the top 1% to stand on. Or at least, the secure floor – or 'glass ceiling', as it presents itself to those below trying to break through it – has moved several stories up. As it continues to rise, it affects the children of the old managerial and professional middle class, less of who can take their place in the pecking order for granted. Like those below them who could formerly have hoped to rise from the aspiring and usually skilled formerly manually working class, they are goaded into running faster up the down escalator of general downward social mobility. All have to compete for the dwindling core of secure and well-paid positions, or else fall into the growing and insecure periphery of employment. As McCullough (2015) writes, 'Previous middle-class certainties have collapsed.'

Precarious work or precariat

Guy Standing (*o.c.*, 7) sees that ‘globalisation has resulted in a fragmentation of national class structures’. However, he argues that rather than increasingly large numbers of people being proletarianised by being pushed down into an expanding working class or a permanently unemployed lumpen-proletariat beneath them, a new class is growing up in parallel with the traditional class structure in the form of *The Precariat*, a ‘new and dangerous class’. Drawn from different sections of society, this is a growing and mainly youthful class. ‘First used by French sociologists in the 1980s, to describe temporary or seasonal workers’, in Italy *precariati* implies ‘a precarious existence as a normal state of living’. In Germany ‘the term has been used to describe not only temporary workers but also the jobless who have no hope of social integration’ (p.13).

Not that ‘the precariat’ is a Gortzian ‘non-class’, although Gortz in questioning the leading role of the working class in the struggle for socialism when he bid *Farewell to the Working Class* over 30 years ago had suggested that changes in the production process had produced a ‘non class’ encompassing ‘all those who have been expelled from production... or whose capacities are under-employed as a result of the automation and computerisation of intellectual work’ (1982, 68). Standing, on the other hand, considers the precariat a ‘class in the making, increasingly able to identify what it wishes to combat and what it wishes to construct’, although ‘far from being homogeneous’ (p.155). It emerges from ‘an education sold as an investment good that has no economic return for most buyers [and which] is [therefore], quite simply a fraud’ (p. 67). Unable to obtain jobs consistent with their level of qualification, school, college and university leavers are forced to take temporary employment or, most likely, continue with the part-time jobs in which they have worked their way through education, often doing more than one job at once. This does not even start to pay off the debts they have acquired through prolonging their supposedly full-time education, yet the longer they stay in this type of employment, the less chance they have of escaping from this ‘losing track’ (p.74).

Yet, the invention of a new precarious class is not needed to recognise that there is no real social mobility and that the proffered professionalisation of the proletariat through widening participation to higher education merely disguises a proletarianisation of the professions. What ‘a good degree’ – the 1st or 2.1 now obtained by 70% of English university graduates – affords is the opportunity to apply for more secure and at least semi-professional employment, even if further study and/or endless ‘internships’ may additionally be required. It is for this reason that so many of those who are qualified to do so continue to apply for degrees that have little intrinsic reward and are often of variable quality in what Palfreyman and Tapper (2015) call the new, mass Tertiary Education, despite incurring debts for fees and maintenance currently estimated at up to £53,000 by the National Union of Students. It is also the reason that most 18+ year olds and their parents regard apprenticeships as an inferior option despite their relentless promotion by government (see Allen 2016). Rather than any new class, there has been a reconstitution of what Marx called the reserve army of labour.

Reserve army or lumpen proletariat

Marx coined the term ‘reserve army of labour’ (RAL) to describe how the unemployed or underemployed sections of the working class were essential to the cycle of capitalist production as it alternated through periods of boom and bust. During periods of crisis this RAL was reconstituted, in the UK ratcheting up to include two million estimated as structurally unemployed since the 1980s. As Clark and Heath (2015) recall, ‘The pattern of cycling between low-paid work and unemployment was [also] evident at the time of the UK’s last recession’ [in the early 1990s] (note 60, p 258). However, contrary to the impression given in the mass media, very few of this so-called ‘underclass’ are the same people plunged permanently into a ‘culture of poverty’; instead, as Shildrick *et al* (2010) found in Glasgow and Teesside, most churn through part-time, insecure and low-paid jobs intermitted by spells of unemployment.

This was one of the problems Kirk Mann faced in his 1991 book *The Making of an English ‘Underclass’* which began by observing that sociologists who advanced the theory of a new class division in society separating ‘the underclass’ from the rest were given publicity not usually granted to anyone claiming to prove the existence of other class divisions. For instance, Charles Murray’s 1990 polemic *The Emerging British UNDERCLASS* (with no inverted commas but capitalized in its original publication), was featured in a special issue of *The Sunday Times* magazine (26/11/89), Murray’s ‘research’ in the UK having been sponsored by Rupert Murdoch’s News International. As Mann pointed out, this followed ‘a long tradition of commentators who have observed a stratum of hopeless degenerates’ (2) at the bottom of society. The names for this section of society have varied down the years:

‘excluded groups, marginalized groups, underclass, residuum, the poor, reserve army of labour, housing and social security classes, stagnant reserve army, relative surplus population and the lumpen proletariat are all terms that have been used to describe a layer within, or beneath, the working class.’ (160)

Mann even added his own contribution to the list – ‘lapilli’, meaning ‘small fragments of lava ejected from a volcano’ (*ibid*) and, presumably, melting back into the molten flow when the temperature rises again. For,

‘while each generation has seen a sub-stratum within the working class, each period has also witnessed the rehabilitation of that sub-stratum. The Victorian residuum appears to have evaporated in the heat of the First World War. Likewise, the class of unemployables of the inter-war period failed to survive the Second World War.’ (107)

Where, asked Mann, did this leave the theory that the underclass reproduced itself through a culture of poverty transmitted down the generations? Especially if, as Mann also acknowledged, the ‘underclass’ – unlike Thompson’s working class – did not make itself. It is, as Bell and Blanchflower point out, ‘a conscript not a volunteer army’ (in Melrose 2012, who adds that – as many have shown – ‘benefit claimants aspire to the same goals, and share the same values, as everyone else... and many are desperate to work’).

In the recession following the Credit Crunch in 2008, the RAL ratcheted up again but there had been a new development. No longer was the RAL synonymous with what Marx and Engels also called ‘the lumpen proletariat’, ‘that passively rotting social scum’, as they described it in *The Communist Manifesto*. This was the original

‘dangerous class’ from which Standing borrowed the subtitle of his book, because although ‘they may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution; their conditions of life... prepare them far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.’(1970, 44) Separate from the working class, they are a constant drag upon the wages and conditions that workers have won. That is why Gamble (2009, 47-8) followed Marx in seeing a reconstitution of the RAL as a key function of capitalist crisis. As Gamble argues, such a reconstitution occurred during the previous economic crisis in the 1970s and was manifested not only in widespread riots or ‘uprisings’ but was eventually contained by what Finn (1987) called *Training Without Jobs*. This has been succeeded by what Ainley and Allen (2010) call ‘education without jobs’, which perhaps prevented similar rioting following the economic crisis of 1988. Aside from the state’s immediate and punitive reaction to the 2011 riots, there has been a different response following what Spours (2015) has called *The Osborne Supremacy*.

It was already the case that, following the raising of the ‘participation age’ in school, college, training, or employment with training to 18 in 2015, young people faced two official choices: to be either students or apprentices, as Matthew Hancock, former-minister in the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, put it in 2014 when he proposed to ‘rebalance’ school-leaver destinations so that ‘university or apprenticeship will be the new norm’ for all 18+ year-olds. Given the c.40% of the cohort in higher education compared with c.10% (being generous) on apprenticeships this was highly unlikely to be achieved. This did not prevent David Cameron the following year from making the even more specious claim that if elected his government would create ‘Three million apprenticeships – that means three million more engineers, accountants and project managers.’ (2015) The *non-sequiter* is blatantly delusional if Cameron believed it or it was misleadingly dishonest if he did not. Yet it is no more illusory than the promises made to university students that degrees guarantee the secure, professional jobs to which most aspire.

In fact, large numbers of young men follow neither of these two official routes, but leave school for unregulated employment. No one knows where since the Careers Service has been privatized out of existence. A minor moral panic followed over these ‘Lost Boys’ who do not show up in Further or Higher Education (where women are now 60% of undergraduates), nor on apprenticeships where the majority are also female. So now widening participation to working-class boys is to be added to the key indicators that will allow HE institutions to charge higher fees under the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework. The ‘Lost Boys’ were also supposed to be mopped up by the expansion of apprenticeships funded by the levy on large employers that the Chancellor, George Osborne, unexpectedly announced in his 2015 autumn spending review. This, however, only provoked bitter recriminations from the employers’ Confederation of British Industry because, as Martin Allen’s on-going research shows, most employers do not want or need apprenticeships, let alone to have to pay for them. The few who do already pay for them themselves.

However, the levy shared a feature with Osborne’s later proclamation of a National Living Wage in his March 2016 budget; this is that, like the levy, the cost of the NLW will also be carried – in so far as they cannot avoid it – by employers. It thus shows that, despite government twaddle about ‘the march of the makers’ and frequent hi-viz appearances by ministers hanging around machines in factories, the Cameron-Osborne regime prioritizes financial over productive capital, eg. in their recently much remarked readiness to bail out banks but not steel works. The NLW also marks the new age of majority for what John Bynner (2005) has called ‘extended youth’, a period during which many young people are acclimatised to irregular and often zero-hours

working while also supposedly attending Tertiary Education and/or training in or out of employment. As Wright had suggested in 1989 in the USA where the tendency to 'education without jobs' had developed earlier, this imposed a 'moratorium' upon youth, during which time he suggested young people were effectively removed from the labour market and consequently any class allocation. The marginalisation of youth, Wright remarked, is reflected by a prolonged stay in the holding pens of full-time education or training. So young people's inability to progress is not the result of a lack of education or skills; to the contrary, education plays an important role in excluding young people from labour market participation so that approximately one in three of *all* 18- to 24-year-olds are recorded as being in full-time education or training. (Table A06, ONS Labour Market Bulletin, March 2015, which also shows that of the two-thirds of 18-24s not in full-time education or training, only 73% are in employment). This would suggest that young people now contribute a significant part of the reconstituted RAL (Ainley 2013) but they do not do so as an unemployed 'lumpen' or 'underclass', 'surplus population' separate from the rest of society but share differentially in this condition for periods of time that have lengthened increasingly since the first raising of the school leaving age in 1972.

Conclusion: education and downward social mobility

Now that the limited period of limited absolute upward social mobility that obtained in the middle of the last century has given way to general downward social mobility in this one, education to all levels – despite all the claims made for it as a doctrine of individual salvation – teaches people to know their place, and only in exceptional cases enables them to leave it. The exception is then made the rule, at least in popular misrepresentation. In hopes of achieving such a distant goal, from childhood on through 'prolonged youth', up to the new age of majority at 25 marked by payment of the full National Living Wage, pupil-students face a series of hurdles that mark critical divergences onto one pathway or another. Without necessarily realising it, individuals can get locked into one or other of these tracks. Recovery from what later becomes evident is relegation to an inferior route (defined both by subject and institution), while not impossible, then becomes increasingly difficult.

These crunch points – and the pressure put on young people by family, peers and themselves – intensify in frequency throughout their educational careers: once every four years after initial testing in primary, but then again on entry to secondary school, after retesting that the government is imposing but teachers are resisting. Guided 'option choices' are then made after three years followed by two years to the first critical cut-off point of five A-C GCSEs. Whether on the academic or vocational route from then on, modularised assessment avoids the trauma of end-of-course, 'sudden-death' examinations that the government wants to revert to. On the other hand, it breaks the individual's scores down into a running total (like US Grade Point Averages, GPAs) that there is incessant pressure to maintain. If these add up to three 'good' A-levels, options are open for application to the hierarchy of Tertiary Education (TE). Yet such is the current competition between universities for students, recovery is again possible even at this late stage, since all degrees are officially equal. As long as you pass the first year, of course – if only with a 'fuck-it 40' pass mark, as Cheeseman's undergraduate interviewees put it (2011, and see also Ainley 2008). Then you can leave the high point of the student experience which is 'freshers' behind, and return to 'the student bubble' for two more years of semester/module tests that you desperately

hope add up to more than ‘a deadly Desmond’ (2.2). Otherwise, you have lost your fee/loan investment and might as well have left at the age of 18 for what employment you could find – with or without ‘apprenticeship’. For those who persist, pressure, stress and cramming intensify until graduation and beyond.

There is more risk of failure for those who can least afford to take it. A lack of confidence in their ability ‘to hack it’ afflicts students from poorer and minority parental backgrounds, and limits their aspirations. They often choose to ‘play safe’ at seemingly less demanding and local new universities with people like themselves. This is a powerful attractor up and down ‘the endless chain of hierarchy and condescension that passes for a system [of higher education] in England’ (Scott 2015), and one which, despite institutional obeisance to individual equality, is raddled with snobbery, sexism and racism. Students accept all this and their mounting debts with resigned fatalism. The odds on gaining a 2:1 or first-class honours are good, however, since these are now achieved by about 70% of graduates as compared with about 20% of a much smaller cohort pre-expansion. They enable entry to usually only a one-year Master’s (when ‘real HE’ begins for two years in the USA), if not endless internships (Perlin 2011). Even on this academic ‘Royal Road’, capped by a PhD (increasingly required to teach in HE), “It doesn’t matter how far you go in the English education system, they’ll fail you in the end!”, as former London schools Tsar Tim Brighouse quips. This is the real ‘student journey’ that is so much celebrated and regulated at universities – and it is an increasingly long one! It is not so much an ‘experience’ as a process. (Ainley 2016, 66)

In this process, nearly all young people today are subject to what Phil Cohen, in *Rethinking the youth question* (1997, p 284 *et seq*), called the ‘career code’. This had previously only been followed by a minority of grammar school-educated traditionally middle-class young people making an institutionalised transition from school to work, and from living at home to living away by way of term-time residential higher education on campus. This ‘career code’ has now been extended to and largely accepted by ‘striving’ parents and children who think of themselves as belonging to the new working middle/middle working class, ‘between the snobs and the jobs’ as has been said. Only a minority of 14+-year-olds are diverted to the once majority second best ‘vocation code’ of ‘apprenticeship’. As Cohen warned, ‘this is not just the material effect of youth unemployment on school transitions; it is about changes in the codes of cultural reproduction’ (*ibid*, 233). It is another reason vocational options, such as the ‘apprenticeships’, which most employers do not want or require, are not so easily revived, especially in the absence of the employment to which they once led. Instead, there are very few options for those who fail to complete the student journey and even for those who do education cannot guarantee secure employment in the way that it once did.

As I concluded a contribution to the British Research Association’s *Research Intelligence* (Spring 2016) to explain why so many young people are unable to move on with their lives:

‘The policy consensus on “rebuilding the vocational route” (again!) should therefore be rejected in favour of a general schooling for “fully developed individuals, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions they perform, are but so many modes of giving free scope to their own natural and acquired powers.”’ (Marx 1971, 414).

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