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Cash and the class system

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The old social markers are all redundant. British society is now a money nation shaped exclusively by wealth - airs and graces no longer matter



There was once an age when class came with breeding. One's parents gave one one's position. One might stray a little above or below - a perfect marital match is never possible - but one knew one's place.

Then, for much of the past century, class was about occupation. You had only to ask someone his or her job and you felt you knew almost everything about them. In 2008 that is no longer true. The 50 per cent of the British people who can just about pay the bills, but who cannot even imagine paying inheritance tax, have a huge range of occupations. Just as those above and below them do. These families, which we still call middle-class, usually have two jobs (the British norm), two or more cars (the norm), a small semi-detached or large terraced house, and a combined income that pays for the mortgage, food, fuel and a couple of holidays a year (one of them somewhere warm). Nowadays, class is all about money.

In the late 19th century, accent, clothing, title and behaviour reflected our origins. There were schools for all classes: the Great Schools for those destined for greatness, and a multitude of not-so-great schools, mostly created or expanded under Victoria's reign, catering for the children of different strata of the new middle classes. You could tell whether a family was upper-middle, middle-middle, or lower-middle-class from the school its children attended. The working classes had their day schools, Sunday schools, church schools and elementary schools, or didn't go to school. You could also tell their class from the street they inhabited. Charles Booth, the philanthropist and social researcher, had maps of London beautifully coloured, street by street. You could see the subtle differentiation between the areas not shaded yellow, the colour of the servant-keeping classes. You could also see those areas shaded black and labelled "vicious, semi-criminal, poor".

Mrs Beeton wrote a book on household management that sold well in those days. It turns out she had only one servant, but she did a good job of pretending to have more. Her book was so successful because of a popular demand for information on how to act up to the class you wished to be. Just like Nigella Lawson today, she provided the fantasy that you, too, could appear to come from a stable above, be of better stock and be more respectable.

We used to have many popular guides to the British class system that told you how to appear just a slight cut above. But in 2008 those at the top have to try to appear like the rest: chummy and normal. This year women had to be told to wear knickers to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. How did we get here from there?

The change happened slowly throughout the 20th century. The decimation of the sons of the Great Schools in the 1914-18 war, the "gifting" of stately homes to what is now the National Trust, the collapse of the financial might of the upper class through the 1920s and 1930s, and a progressive tax regime that lasted from the end of the Second World War until the beginning of Thatcherism - all these things changed what class meant. Whereas under Queen Victoria secondary schools had been designed to segregate the middle class, the Education Act 1944 split up the working class. It had the side effect of creating a one-off generation, selected at 11 by what was called an ability test, a few of whom later got good jobs in universities and mused about class. Boys were in the majority, as the eleven-plus tests had been made easier for them. (They had to be made easier as there were far more grammar school places for boys than for girls, yet boys did worse in the tests.)

Not surprisingly, these grammar school boys, with occupations their fathers had often not heard of, came to think of occupation and job title as very important. As civil servants, university dons and market researchers, they designed class classification systems based on men's occupations. Occupation was seen as a proxy for behaviour, for leisure pursuits, for taste, for class. Under this system, the university lecturer from humble origins was equal to the don who did not need to draw his salary. Women fitted awkwardly into such schema.

Unfortunately, classification based on occupation came to predict certain behaviour less well over time. Almost from the moment when the occupations were grouped, people started voting less and less reliably by occupational class. They took longer to stop behaving so predictably in lifestyle, partly because health outcomes have long ante cedents, but premature mortality, too, has become a little less predictable by class.

So, are we a more classless society? It doesn't feel quite like that. What I think has shifted is how we know what class we are in.

Give someone a fancy job title today and it may not mean quite as much as it did a few decades ago. You know what "general manager for the horizontal arrangement of goods" means, and what is being stacked where. Yet it is also possible for two jobs to have the same title but be completely different. Different members of parliament, for instance, have very different lifestyles and differing levels of income and wealth. In the past they did, too - but you could predict their class from knowing their political party label. That is much less the case today. Now there are better ways to gauge class. Tell me where you went to school, what your father's job was then, and your home postcode, and I'll quite happily put you in a pigeonhole. It still helps to know your job title, but I'm not that bothered about it. I'd be much more interested in your financial situation and that of your wider family. Your class is your wealth - and your family wealth.

THE NEW DEFINITIONS

In Britain in 2008, if you cannot save £10 a month and pay for an annual holiday, you are most probably Poor. This month, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation published a survey, *A Minimum Income Standard for Britain: What People Think*, which suggested that £13,400 a year was the minimum for a single adult, and £26,800 for a couple with two children. Roughly a quarter of households live on less than the equivalent amounts in Britain today. Most are in debt. A holiday would be taking the kids to their grandparents over the summer. If they are pensioners, they spend over a tenth of their income to stay warm. The Poor are the new "lower class".

The Poor are now so numerous that sociologists subclassify them. The poorest of the poor - the Very Poor - have an income of £8,600 or less, and have no savings or wider family network to call on (so no annual visits to Grandma's). If you are in the poorest tenth of households in Britain, and your child asks for £3 for the coach fare for a school trip, you have to go without something else to pay for it. When asked, the Very Poor describe themselves as living in poverty.

Above the quarter who are poor is a group that has been squeezed in number in recent years: those who are neither wealthy nor poor. They are Normal. If you are Normal you can pay for school trips, and a holiday (but not in Mauritius). You are getting by, but not comfortably. You are in a shrinking middle group. A single adult living in the middle will have an annual income of between £13,400 and about £29,600. Being at the top of that band entails working for £15 an hour for a 38-hour week. Live on your own and earn more than that, and you are not Normal - you are in the best-off quarter. Have two kids and a joint income of £60,000-plus, and you are not Normal.

Those in the middle (single income: £13,400-£29,600) are not the old middle class, but what was the old lower middle class and upper working class. Those who once tottered on that crucial boundary now find they are all jumbled up in a new middle where acquired airs, or evidence of a more humble background, count for much less. Today, the middle makes up almost exactly 50 per cent of UK households. Across Britain, outside of London, most people are still Normal, but that normality ranges from living a whisker above poverty to living a whisker below the wealthy.

The Wealthy are the 25 per cent of the population who are living on an income of more than £60,000 for a couple with kids, or on £30,000 or over for a single adult. (Having high savings and low outgoings can also make you wealthy at annual incomes below this level.) You are in the Wealthy group if, should you and your spouse simultaneously drop dead today, your estate would be liable for inheritance tax (the single-person inheritance tax threshold is now £312,000). But don't worry: most people like you will manage to spend your wealth in old age long before you have a chance to pass much of it on. If you are wealthy, you are partaking in most of the norms of society. Most people in this group, however, choose not to use private health and education provision. If they did, other luxuries would have to be forgone.

Above the Wealthy is a group that does exclude itself from the norms of society, and for which the choices are less problematic: we'll call it the Exclusively Wealthy. They make up about 5 per cent of us. For them, the question is not where to go on holiday, but where is best to go in each season. What sets the Exclusively Wealthy apart from the rest is not their reliance on private provision, which they use routinely, but their large properties, multiple foreign holidays, and outright purchase of new luxury cars. You need to be doing about two out of three of those things, while preferably having a six-figure household income, to be up with these Joneses.

There is a national fixation with this group, and enough written on them to sell a month of Sunday newspapers. Suffice to say here that they are fractal in nature. Within the best-off 5 per cent, the top half are so much better off than the rest that they make the other half feel poor. Within that better-off half, half are so much better off that . . . and so on. It's a recursive definition. It ends with the 0.01 per cent at the very top who worry about being kidnapped, and know that their children and lovers lie to them for their wealth.

This is our wealth-based British class system today. It is a 25-50-25 division, the edges of which can be shaved off to almost infinite layers of abstraction. It may sound crude, but money is. Airs and graces no longer matter. In fact, it is crucial to try to avoid them regardless of which end of the scale you are from. Dress down if you might otherwise look like a "toff": take off that tie, unclip that accent. Dress up if you come from more dour stock: sensible suits, a neat haircut, and hold your knife and fork correctly. Most of the old markers of class fade as, for men, a ubiquitous "bloke" is created and women look "smart". Where the signs remain - those brown leather shoes that only men from certain schools still wear, that fake handbag that only women not quite au fait would carry - they matter less and less.

KNOWING THE SHAPE WE'RE IN

The comedian Roseanne Barr once said that Americans were all middle-class until the man came to turn the electricity off.

In the United States, those from the worst-off fifth of families work for eight days or more to earn what those in the best-off fifth are paid in a day. In Britain, that ratio is seven days' work for one day's pay, in Ireland six days, in France just over five days, in Sweden four days and in Iceland three and a half days. Class systems within the rich countries of the world increasingly reflect their income-inequality ratios.

The very least we should do, if we ever want to understand our changed social world, is to learn about its basic shape. In Britain, as in many other countries, we best know our place through a mechanism even older than the Victorian class system: we take a census.

In the past, British censuses have responded to the way society was changing. When people started to get hot running water, the census asked if they had it. When almost everyone did have it, the census stopped asking (similarly over inside toilets, over cars and over occupations). It took a riot or two before the census asked about ethnicity. It took parliament to insist that in 2001 we ask about religion. Yet a campaign in the same year to insert a question about household income failed.

In the US, the census asks about income. In Scandinavia, it is recorded on national population registers. The next UK census in 2011, however, will still not ask about citizens' income or wealth. (Not, at least in England and Wales; Scotland may be the exception.) It will mean, in effect, that we will not be asking about class.

Perhaps we are afraid of what we would be told, and what kind of a segregated country we would see.

This article is published in the summer edition of the Fabian Review as part of the Fabian Society's work on class and inequality, and on the Fabian website (www.fabians.org.uk). Danny Dorling works with the Social and Spatial Inequalities Research Group in the department of geography, University of Sheffield. With Bethan Thomas, he is the author of "Identity in Britain: a Cradle-to-Grave Atlas" (Policy Press). He is also an author, with colleagues, of "The Atlas of the Real World" (Thames & Hudson) and "The Grim Reaper's Road Map" (Policy Press), both to be published in October