Models of Contemporary Social Class: the Great British Class Survey

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Abstract
Although conceptually distinctive, a comparison of the Great British Class Survey (‘GBCS’) and NS-SeC (taken to be illustrative of previous class schema) shows they produce basically similar pictures of class in contemporary Britain. Among the advantaged, GBCS usefully separates off a very rich class, and technical professionals, from the established middle class (although with some problems of cut-off points of financial advantage, and the concept of ‘elite’). However, the intermediate classes remain an area of less clarity in both schemes. Among the less advantaged, substantial age differences prompt reflection about economic history, and the extent to which cultural capital captured as differences in consumption behaviour is actually bounded by fashion and material circumstances. Although NS-SeC is preferred for its practical utility, the measurement of occupational groups remains problematic, indicating the continued need to improve the tools of class analysis.

Keywords: Social class; class schema; NS-SeC; Great British Class Survey; social transformation.

Introduction - Models of Contemporary Social Class: the Great British Class Survey

The popular response to the BBC’s Great British Class Survey (‘GBCS’) produced a mixed but energetic reaction among die-hard class analysts. Last April saw an immediate avalanche of nearly 5 million online participants using the BBC’s Class Calculator (Savage 2013), together with blanket media coverage. The first online and subsequent conventional publication by the research team (Savage et al 2013) was downloaded well over 23,000 times in the first five months (Sage Citation Metric data, September 2013), demonstrating that rather than class being dead, it was more the case that “Class is dead” is dead’. On the other hand, as prompt responses also showed (e.g. letters to The Guardian 5 April 2013 from Guy Standing; Roger Goodger; David Rose and Eric Harrison; etc.) there were both serious and frivolous doubts about terminology and operationalisation from advocates of the relative merits of other schemes, notably the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SeC).

The previous week, the first presentation of the GBCS to a professional audience, at the Social Divisions and Identities Stream Plenary of the BSA Annual Conference 2013, had left those present fascinated but also somewhat disoriented – a not unusual result of methodological innovation. Perhaps precisely because of the long history of debate over competing class schema (inter alia, Wright 1985; Marshall et al 1989; Devine 1997; Goldthorpe 2000; Rose and Prevalin 2001; Crompton 2008) we had become too accustomed to class schema based on occupations, work skills, employment contracts, property, and expert knowledge. Even post-Bourdieu, it has been one thing to think of various classes in this basically materialist sense as also having
different social and cultural capitals: it is quite another to use induction to re-draw class boundaries on the basis of the amount and kinds of social and cultural capitals possessed, and to offer a new model of the classes that comprise society today. It is therefore a challenge to respond to the GBCS on its own terms, particularly while we await further publication of the detail of the processes and thinking behind the GBCS class schema.

How different, how similar?

There are arguably three main ways in which we can approach GBCS. First, we can debate its principles and theoretical grounding, in the best tradition of achieving academic precision in definitions, like distinguishing social class from status, or work situation from market situation, or the relative importance of objective and subjective measurements of class position. Although GBCS is an empirical operationalization of a Bourdieusian approach, in this sense it raises issues of sociological theory, pointing towards further reflection about the exact meaning and situational applicability of Bourdieu’s concept of capitals. The second focal point for discussion is the picture of British society GBCS produces. Does it tell us something we did not know about the UK, and is the new information interesting and useful? Both these issues draw on extensive bodies of sociological work, so that our responses will depend on our various pre-existing socio-political takes on the contemporary class system (and an element of subjective value judgement). However, regardless of our stances, GBCS’s identification of an ‘elite’, a ‘precariat’, and separate fractions of the less advantaged classes, does encourage us to re-consider how the UK has evolved from an industrial, to a finance capital, dominated economy, and the consequences this has for life chances, class-related social identities, and cultural change under contemporary capitalism.

A third consideration is a more technical one, which seeks to unpack how the classes have been defined, and how the new classes differ from what we had before, such as the NS-SeC version of the class structure. Here we might argue that the principles identified in the first approach are right (or wrong) but the detailed construction is sub-optimal. Thus we might dispute class boundaries and cut-off points, or the indicator questions used to measure levels of the various capitals. We might also wish to question the validity of the implicit causal model: to what extent is class produced by consumption behaviours and tastes, or are consumption behaviours and tastes produced by other, more basic features of class, or indeed, do they result from other social divisions like age, gender, and income (Bennett et al 2009).

In this article, I intend to leave the first approach mainly to the Bourdieusians and post-Marxists, although this aspect cannot be ignored, because of course the three approaches overlap. Instead, I wish to deal more with the picture of Britain that emerges, and the technical challenges of class schema. I propose to explore some of these issues by comparing GBCS with NS-SeC’s seven analytical classes (or eight, if we include the ‘never worked and long-term unemployed’), i.e. deploying NS-SeC both as representative of more conventional classificatory devices, and as an expression of social class rather than just as a means of coding occupational groups.

This is primarily a heuristic and narrative device, which also reflects my own Weberian take on class analysis. However: at risk of ending up crushed between a rock and a hard place here, I wish to adopt an eclectic position somewhere between the advocates and critics of GBCS, rather than taking a stance for or against on the basis of the principles of their theorization, or in defence of NS-SeC. This middle ground provides a convenient vantage point for considering the outcome of the two approaches, before exploring some of what lies behind the two class products on offer.

Thus perhaps the most striking feature of GBCS, contrary to initial responses both from its architects and commentators, is that while there are important conceptual and structural differences, its findings are
remarkably similar to the NS-SeC seven analytical class format (and indeed to earlier schema). This can be seen from Figure 1 which compares several class classifications.

**Figure 1: A comparison of class classifications**

| Classes       | Registrar General | SEG collapsed | Goldthorpe | NS-SeC | GBCS  |
|---------------|-------------------|---------------|------------|--------|-------|
| **Social Classes (see Scott 2013)** |                   |               |            |        |       |
| **Advantaged:** |                   |               |            |        |       |
| Capitalist    |                   |               | (elite)    |        | (elite) |
| Service       | I; 1;             | I; 1.1        | elite;     |        |       |
|               | 2; II             | 1.2           | established MC |      |       |
| **Intermediate:** |                   |               |            |        |       |
| Petty bourgeoisie |                   | IV            | 2          |        |       |
| White collar workers | III; 3a; 3b | III; 3       | new affluent worker | | |
| Blue collar elite | V                | V             | 5          |        |       |
| **Subordinate:** |                   |               |            |        |       |
| Skilled manual | IIIm              | VI            | 6          | traditional WC | |
| Unskilled manual | IV; V            | VII           | 7          | emergent service sector | 8 |
|                | 5; 6              |               |            |        | precariat|

Here we see that the broad structure of society, regardless of whether classified by skill level, ‘standing in the community’, ‘desirability’, employment contract/ occupational aggregate or Bourdieusian capitals, remains much the same. As we also know from occupational ranking exercises (e.g. Coxon and Jones 1978, 1979) or studies of social association like CAMSIS (Stewart et al 1980; Bergman and Joye 2001; Bottero 2005), cleaners are not equated to consultant surgeons, nor care workers to car workers.

This is not to ignore differences in boundary location, that some groups are allocated to different levels, or that a number of ambiguities emerge, nor indeed to disregard the complexities of conceptualisation (see for example the exchange between Penn (1981) and Goldthorpe (1981) over the Goldthorpe class schema, the ancestor of NS-SeC). The classifications which we choose obviously have a considerable impact on our findings, and all the more so as we adopt more detailed levels of analysis. However, the point of first drawing attention to the similarities is to show that the classic formulation of class situations is remarkably robust, and to encourage reflection about the exact nature of the classification outcomes. To repeat, the issue is that there are differences and similarities in outcomes, both of which should be taken into account.

From this perspective, GBCS offers three innovations. On the one hand, it largely retains the traditional picture of the more ‘advantaged classes’ (to follow Scott’s (2013) framework), while effectively proposing a simple sub-division which adds emphasis to the economic inequalities of the ‘elite’. On the other, its characterisation of the less advantaged classes is more innovative, suggesting more substantially different working classes, in keeping with the contemporary labour market and a consumer/service society. Finally in the middle of the schema, the intermediate classes continue to tax our theoretical frameworks.

**The advantaged classes**

It is axiomatic in sociology that at the top of society sit a group conventionally characterised as capitalists, the ruling class, or the elite(s). Any theory of class relations or power is incomplete without them, but they are
missing from conventional class schema. Goldthorpe (1981, 273) has recognised this, including them within his Class 1 rather than having a separate category for the pragmatic reason that they are too small a group to show up, let alone sustain analysis, even in national samples. I can sympathise: in a national random sample of nearly 5000 men resident in Scotland, I was able to identify only four informants who were indisputably members of the Scottish elite, two of whom would have been immediately identifiable had I attempted to discuss their experiences.

Although predicated on different principles and techniques, in effect the upper range of Goldthorpe’s service class becomes the ‘elite’ in GBCS, consisting of the 6% of households, headed largely by managers and company directors, who have ‘very high economic capital (especially savings)’ and highbrow cultural capital (Savage et al 2013, 230-1). There are two problems with this: are they best labelled the ‘elite’, and have the entry requirements for belonging to this category been set too low? Despite their privileged existence, it is potentially misleading to treat all of these people as the members of what is normally called the elite – a much smaller, more powerful, interconnected and homogenous group (see Stanworth 2013).

Their material characteristics suggest a more accurate, if less neat, descriptor might be the ‘upper one-sixth of the service class’. However, while the identification of a sub-group of this kind is a welcome step, they are by no means the most wealthy members of society. Their average annual household income is less than £90,000, whereas in round figures – from the Institute for Fiscal Studies – the top 1% of earners (a measure sometimes used to define elites: Bihagen et al 2012) have for several years all been earning at least £100,000 per annum, while the top 0.1% all individually earn more than £350,000, with a mean personal income of £780,000 (Brewer et al 2008). The average value of the GBCS elite’s houses was £325,000, as against £330,000 for detached houses in England and Wales in early 2013. In the South-East and Greater London, where the majority of the capitalist and elite class actually live – ‘their residences are all over-represented in the south east of England, and especially in areas close to London in the Home counties’ (Savage et al 2013, 234) – the average for a detached house, i.e. the sort a conventionally-defined elite household would be likely to own, was valued at £442,333 and £852,455 respectively (Land Registry figures reported by BBC, June 2013).

These price and income levels are of course dependent on when data were collected. The issue here is not the exact financial values but the principle of using assets and income as indicators creates an inevitable vulnerability due to the volatility of house prices and earnings. We have ample independent evidence to show change is happening (‘House prices rise by 5.4% over 12 months, says Halifax’; Headline in The Guardian, 6 September 2013: ‘Big business bosses and chief executives saw a 15 per cent increase in their salaries this year’ (This is Money.com, 14 November 2012). When combined with an inductive method of identifying classes, the result is a fluid basis for the categories: they cannot hold constant. Thresholds are susceptible to rapid change. Even handling this in relative terms, for example by comparisons of percentile distribution, would still be limited by the practicalities of operationalisation, as any chosen thresholds would be open to challenge as being incorrectly set. Savage et al (2013, 25) recognise that their ‘analysis is dependent on the measures used to construct the indicators’ and that this is a point which ‘needs to be under-scored’. However, they then argue that their measures of economic capital ‘are relatively straightforward and should not cause concern’.

This view may be over-optimistic, if popular reaction is any guide. A common cavil from the public who took the BBC’s quick version of the BGCS, the Class Calculator test, was disbelief at finding themselves located in the GBCS elite class. Even allowing for the fact that the Class Calculator ‘was designed by the BBC to mimic the more complex model we had developed on the basis of the survey data, and the two should not be conflated’ (Savage, 2013), there seem to be grounds for asking whether the combination of economic capital with the other capitals, in the latent class analysis used in the main study, has produced a cut-off point which sits uneasily with other things we know about the material distinctiveness of the most affluent in our society.
Clusters of cultural capitals may have blurred the division between the very affluent top one or two percent and other wealthy but less well-endowed, or less senior, managers and professionals. Is the GBCS ‘elite’ the classic elite of mainstream accounts of social stratification (Stanworth 2013)? Alternatively, perhaps further consideration needs to be given to whether the sharp distinction in conventional models of ruling class/elites and masses is sufficiently robust. On the other hand, we might speculate whether the key characteristics of the GBCS elite lies in their financial advantages under a system of distributive inequality, or in their powers of social closure, or other facets of class-based social action and power.

If however, the emphasis is not on their wealth, or class or power relations, but on the fact that a segment of the managerial and professional class, in this study comprising 6% of the population, are extremely advantageously placed, then GBCS is making a useful point. This group have household incomes ‘almost double that of the next highest class’, the worth of their houses is ‘considerably higher than any other class’, and their savings are ‘well over double’ those of any other class. Fewer of their number are from ethnic minorities, more are graduates (and from ‘elite’ universities), and they mainly occupy senior managerial or profession positions: ‘they are clearly a relatively exclusive grouping…. this very wealthy class is now clearly distinguished from all the other classes in Britain, and the economic differences are huge.’ (Savage et al 2013, 233; Savage 2013). In drawing attention to this, GBCS offers a means of sub-dividing what has been seen as an over-large and undifferentiated service class (Savage et al 1992). Although not featured as such in the GBCS, the occupations most represented in this upper segment seem to be managers rather than professionals, perhaps suggesting that the ‘controllers’ are in a superior material position vis-a-vis the ‘social and cultural experts’ who Bell and others have argued form a new middle class (Guveli et al 2012).

Of course, NS-SeC also differentiates components of the service class. At its analytical class level it distinguishes between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ managerial, administrative and professional occupations, with the former further sub-divided into employers, higher managerial and administrative occupations in large organisations, and higher professional occupations. In this latter, more detailed version of ‘operational categories’ and ‘sub-categories’, we have 11 sub-divisions, as in Fig. 2

Figure 2: Operational Categories and Sub-categories, Advantaged Classes

L.1 Employers in large establishments
L.2 Higher managerial and administrative occupations
L.3.1 ‘Traditional’ higher professional employees
L.3.2 ‘New’ higher professional employees
L.3.3 ‘Traditional’ self-employed higher professionals
L.3.4 ‘New’ self-employed higher professionals
L.4.1 ‘Traditional’ lower professional and higher technical occupations
L.4.2 ‘New’ lower professional and higher technical occupations
L.4.3 ‘Traditional’ self-employed lower professional and higher technical occupations
L.4.4 ‘New’ self-employed lower professional and higher technical occupations
L.5 Lower managerial and administrative occupations

Adapted from ONS 2013a.

1. Employers who are also professionals are treated as professionals and allocated to Level 3.
2. ‘Traditional’: occupations conventionally regarded as ‘professional’
3. ‘New’: occupations conventionally not regarded as ‘professional’
One of the strengths of NS-SeC is the way it provides for a variety of levels for use in analysis, and that these are logically compatible, allowing combination or disaggregation as needed. However, this differentiation is not without its own problems, because although the classification is based in employment contracts, we know in practice this combines several different characteristics: organisational size; organizational authority; occupational specialisation; occupational prestige; and self-employment. The main axis of distinction between NS-SeC analytical Class I and Class II is the separation of traditional professions and senior managers on the one hand, and newer professions (‘semi-professions’: Etzioni 1969) and administrators on the other. This reflects Goldthorpe’s earlier terminology of his Class I being ‘the higher and intermediate levels’ of the service class, and his Class II (i.e. L.4 and L5 in NS-SeC) as ‘the subaltern or cadet levels of the service class’ (1987, 41). What GBCS usefully appears to be doing with its alternative approach is to identify an upper subgroup of the very rich within NS-SeC Class I, distinctive both in their economic and cultural capitals.

GBCS then differentiates between the Established Middle Class (25% of households) and a Technical Middle Class (6% of households). Taken together, these ‘middle classes’ are a very substantial proportion of UK society. While we should not become too focused on the similarity of sizes of the middle class between the two schema (see Figure 3), it is tempting to see GBCS as providing a three-class dis-aggregation of the part of society located by NS-SeC in analytic classes 1 and 2.

**Figure 3: Size of Social Classes: %**

| NS-SeC*                          | GBCS       |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| Large employers and higher managerial | 6.0 Elite  |
| Higher professional             | 12.0 25.0 Traditional middle class |
| Lower managerial and professional | 24.4 6.0 Technical Middle Class |
| Intermediate occupations        | 14.9 15.0 New Affluent Workers |
| Small employers                 | 11.0       |
| Lower supervisory and technical | 8.1        |
| Semi-routine occupations        | 16.5 14.0 Traditional Working Class |
| Routine occupations             | 13.0 19.0 Emergent Service Workers |

Source: NS-SeC adapted from 2011 Census: Key Statistics KS611EW: r21ewrttableks611ewladv1_tcm77-290886 (accessed 19.01.2013). GBCS from Savage et al 2013, Table 5.

*excludes full-time students.

Whereas NS-Sec uses employment contract to differentiate its two classes, GBCS’s introduction of non-economic capitals seems in practice to separate out the very rich, and then to split the remainder into two groups in a way that still has echoes of the old fault line between management/old professions and newer, less prestigious technical professions. It is their cultural capital which expresses the strongest difference (Savage et al 2013, Table 5 and pp234-7). While it is interesting to discover the variety of capital situations within the middle class, a question lingers about how far the GBCS Technical Middle Class occupies a separate class situation from the Established Middle Class. Are the orientations of their occupational function towards science and technology, and their ‘cultural apathy’ (Savage et al 2013, 237), sufficient grounds for a separate identity? Alternatively, are there other as yet unexplored grounds for disaggregating the relatively large established middle class which in GBCS is still one-quarter of the population? If not, their numerical preponderance and cultural homogeneity marks them out as the key class typifying contemporary society.
The intermediate classes

As Fig. 1 showed, it is in the centre of the class structure that the two schema most sharply differ. NS-SeC, with its conceptual origins in earlier formulations initially by Marx (Payne, 1987, 38-40) and later by Lockwood and Goldthorpe, tends to treat the intermediate classes as a residual after the service class and the working class have been specified. The location of this residual in the class hierarchy is ambiguous. Goldthorpe (1987, 43) quoting Giddens in support of the view that classes do not have a consistently hierarchical form, states that calculation of upward social mobility rates should exclude movement from the working class to the intermediate class, and downward social mobility should likewise exclude moves from intermediate to working class (a method which Goldthorpe does not actually apply systematically nor transparently in his subsequent analysis).

However, ONS advises that the NS-SeC ‘three-class version may be assumed to involve a form of hierarchy but none of the other versions can be regarded as ordinal scales’. The meaning of ‘intermediate’ in the three-class version is therefore different from the other versions, and comes about because ‘users of the old SECs wanted something similar to the old ‘manual/non-manual’ divide and so the three-class model was created as a faute de mieux approximation’ (ONS 2013a).

(If sociologists with our expert knowledge recognise the ‘semi-hierarchical’ nature of social class, why should we expect members of the public to define themselves neatly and ‘correctly’ as middle class or working class? (Payne 2012a)).

As Crompton (2008) among others has objected, one of the key features of the intermediate class, as conventionally conceived, is the prevalence of secretarial, administrative and service occupations which are typically filled by women. While they have the higher status which attaches to white collar work, remuneration levels are frequently below those of the skilled manual trades, and their supervisors are often men. The Registrar General’s elaborate classifications of male occupations (e.g. among the skilled trades in manufacturing and construction) is not replicated for office or service workers. Women’s routine white collar occupations have therefore been treated as rather truly intermediate, or as the functional equivalents of men’s skilled manual trades, and thus as part of the less advantaged classes.

In the NS-SeC three-class version, the class left as the filling in the sandwich consists of the intermediate analytical class 3 uneasily combined with employers in small establishments, and own account workers (analytical class 4). The own account worker category is both a strength but also one of the weaker points in NS-SeC, because although it is consistent with the central importance for class relations of attachment to the employment status of not being an employee, for many lower level workers self-employment is simply a tax avoidance manoeuvre which hides what is essentially an employer/employee relationship. Were it not for this, many members of class 4 would be allocated elsewhere, and not seen as part of the intermediate class (see also zero hours contracts, below).

GBCS partly by-passes these ambiguities by not having a clear intermediate class – the New Affluent Workers being the closest – in what is presented in a listing suggestive of a hierarchy (Savage et al 2013, Tables 5 and 8, and the order in which the classes are discussed pp233-243). Nonetheless, the discussion of the new affluent workers conveys a degree of uncertainty about their position. As a class they ‘cannot easily be identified as either middle or working class’, being ‘an unusually fluid grouping’ playing a ‘complex and ambivalent role’. However, they share little with NS-SeC analytical Class 3, or the intermediate category in the collapsed three-class version.
For a start, the new affluent workers are ‘the most male of any’ of the seven classes, not exclusively white
collar, relatively economically secure without being very well-off, and socially and culturally active. If we are
looking for the kinds of employees found in NS-SeC class 3, we would find some of the ‘menial white collar
occupations’ in GBCS class 5, the traditional working class, which in GBCS is predominantly female. It is
also possible that some of the upper, more technical end of this segment have found a home in GBCS class 3
which ‘has an above-average proportion of women’(ibid, 238-240). While GBCS may take us a step forward
by connecting ideas about the affluent worker (i.e. the formation of large parts of the post-industrial working
class) with the intermediate zone of the class structure, it would not be unreasonable to say that, like its
predecessors, GBCS has not resolved the ambiguities of class situations in the middle of the class system.
Lacking the nostalgic romanticism of the heroic proletarian manual worker, or sociologists self-obsessed
interest in their fellow professionals, the intermediate class remains the embarrassing poor cousins of class
analysis, under-researched and under-conceptualised by conventional studies.

The less advantaged classes

The new affluent workers of class 4 make most sense when taken as part of a trio along with the two ‘clearly
less advantaged classes’ (Savage et al 2013, 240), the Emergent Service Workers of GBCS class 6 and the
Traditional Working Class, class 5. Taken together, they reflect the long-wave evolution of the economy, from
manufacturing to services. This is manifested in the different situations of these three classes, with the new
affluent and emergent service workers being relatively new creations which are probably still expanding, and
the traditional working class, which we know from other sources has been contracting. The emergent service
workers are ‘relatively young, with a mean age of 34’, whereas the traditional working class is ‘relatively old,
with an average age of 65’ (ibid, 240, 2245). This offers support for the plausible but relatively
unsubstantiated thesis that declining industries recruit fewer young employees, while new and expanding
industrial sectors employ disproportionately high numbers of young people, thus being sites for upward
absolute social mobility (Payne 1987).

The NS-SeC classes also show different age profiles, which should not surprise us: senior managers are well
advanced in their careers, whereas non-graduate jobs can be started at an earlier age. However, the question of
how age interacts with class has not received sufficient attention in mainstream class analysis, apart from
childhood and old age. For instance, while at a general level, as Arber and Ginn’s work on pensions and
gender has shown,

in retirement middle class people are both wealthier and healthier than their working class counterparts…the
social class divisions carried over into old age appear to be widening (Ginn and Arber 1991, 371)

this is not the same as saying that their class positions remain unchanged. If only on a technical point, the NS-
SeC user guidelines accept that the schema is unable to provide a satisfactory answer because retired people
are, like the long term unemployed, lacking an employment relationship by means of which to classify them.

The mean age of GBCS class 6, at 34 years, and class 5, at 66 years, places them at the ends of the age range,
each effectively 10 years apart from the five other classes, whose mean ages cluster more closely between 44
and 57. Are the tastes in food, or preferences for holiday destinations really markers of capital and class, or
rather manifestations of age-related fashions and life experience, or indeed, of income. Are the financial assets
of the elite class simply the result of how long its members have enjoyed material conditions in which assets
could be accumulated (i.e. age acts a surrogate for career length and earnings)?

The age differences are also demographically intriguing. First, if the traditional workers have already passed
the former conventional age for male retirement, will this class rapidly shrink further as older members die
and are not replaced by younger recruits? Or is its high mean age something to do with its unusually high
proportion of women (62%), who particularly in manual classes out-live their male partners? Second, what happens to the present emergent service workers as they age? Do they stay in the same type of work, so that the face-to-face interactions between employees and customers in the service industries (‘bar work, chefs, customer service occupations and call centre workers’ Savage et al 2013, 241) become those between ever-older employees (many from ethnic minorities: ibid, 240) dealing with demanding youthful customers who instead continue to be drawn from the ever-replenishing pool of younger age-groups? Or will the workers be replaced by a younger, and probably cheaper, labour force, leaving the job prospects and class situation of the original generation uncertain?

A further set of issues raised by the age profiles (and incomes) is how cultural engagement plays out across the classes (Bennett et al 2009). In as far as GBCS has operationalised cultural capital in terms of taste and consumption (Savage et al 2013, 226-8) it is not surprising that younger generations have different interests than older ones. ‘(V)ideo games, social network sites, the internet, playing sports, watching sports, spending time with friends, going to the gym, going to gigs and preference for rap and rock’ are not exclusively the preserve of young people, but most of these activities are strongly associated with physical agility, absence of child-rearing commitments, and easily-accessed fashionable ‘novelties’. Equally, the financial costs of ‘attending stately homes, museums, art galleries, jazz, theatre and French restaurants’ (ibid 227) are greater than going to the pub, holidaying in Spain, eating out less often (and even then preferring fast food and fish and chips). Consumption behaviour may well serve as cultural boundary maintenance but it is less obvious that we are dealing essentially with social class, rather than age grouping or expenditure patterns per se.

These questions should not obscure the importance of differentiating between on the one hand the Traditional Working Class, and on the other, the New Affluent Workers of class 4 and the Emergent Service Workers of GBCS class 6. As Savage et al (ibid, 246) put it, the members of the latter two newly identified classes seem, in many respects, to be the children of the ‘traditional working class’, and they might be said to exemplify the stark break in working class culture which has been evident as a result of de-industrialisation, mass unemployment, immigration and the restructuring of urban space.

Much the same could be said about the final GBCS class, the Precariat. Although already conceptualised in different terms by Standing (????), this identification of a particularly disadvantaged group, ‘characterised by high amounts of insecurity on all of our measures of capital’, is to be welcomed as providing a perspective on contemporary British society that has escaped the attention of NS-SeC. At £8,253, the precariat’s low average household income in 2011 (£5,000 less than the traditional working class, and £12,800 less than the emergent service workers) is shockingly low (Savage et al 2013, 230). It is difficult to see how families in the precariat (15% of the sample) can afford cultural engagement even with ‘video games, social network sites, the internet’, let alone watching sport or going to gigs, and still less attending stately homes, the theatre and French restaurants (ibid, 227). It would be interesting to know how far members of this class are permanent members, and the extent to which they move in and out of it (and across different levels of it) in the way we know that people move in and out of poverty (Platt 2013).

Some problems of constructing class schema: not working full-time

Although Savage et al do not further address the point, it seems reasonable to connect the position of at least some of the precariat to a generic lack of full-time employment. Under the policies of the Coalition Government, the continued under-performance of the UK economy in terms of jobs and incomes for ordinary people has foregrounded part-time and zero hours contracts. Jobs which are less than full-time raise problems for NS-SeC, and any other class schema based on occupations: in terms of class, is part of a full-time job the same as a full-time job? This not a minor issue: some eight million UK workers are part-timers. In the second
quarter of 2013, ONS data show 5,925,000 women and 2,130,000 men working part-time, together constituting more than a quarter of the work force. Not surprisingly, many of these fell into NS-SeC classes with high proportions of females employees: the lower managerial/ professional, intermediate, and semi-routine classes, with an over-representation in the latter two (ONS 2013b, c). In other words, there is both a high prevalence of part-time work, and it has a particular relevance for the specification of certain social classes, where part-time work intersects with gender.

Whereas it is relatively easy to see how a full-time job can stand for work situation or relationship to the means of production, part-time employment presents more of a challenge. At its most basic, when does paid employment count as having a job: is one hour a week a job? Are 10 hours enough? Are 20? Is a week in which there is no part-time paid employment a break in employment or just a feature of some part-time or zero hours contracts? We can answer these questions in a somewhat arbitrary way – for example OECD (Bastelaer 1997, 12; OECD 1999, 22; OECD 2013) gives no explanation why it defines part-time work for its statistical reports, like the annual Employment Outlook, as ‘usual working hours under 30 per week’, while acknowledging that some of its member states use a cut-off of 35 hours. However, OECD also confusingly leaves it to individual informants to self-define what they regard as ‘part-time’ when reporting preferences for types of employment. The OECD approach does not confront the considerable difference between an occasional few hours and working, say, two or three days each week. What precisely is it about the content of the work situation that actually ‘produces’ social class in people? Does this content apply uniformly, so that each hour in a block of hours has the same defining potential? This would mean that we treat the experience of 30+ hours of full-time work as applying to part-time work regardless of the number of hours worked, which is in effect what the first OECD definition does.

Alternatively, it could be argued that the number of hours has a specific and/or differential impact, beyond the amount of take-home pay, such that it becomes an additional dimension of the work contract, i.e. that part-time employment is different in kind. For instance, if we put the definitional problem on hold, we can say that despite the Part-time Workers (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2000 it is often the case that part-time employment is less secure, comes with fewer benefits such as pension rights, holiday pay or work place entitlements, and pays at less per hour than pro rata full-time rates. This is because the Regulations allow employers exemption on ‘objective’ (e.g. ‘it would cost too much’) or pro rata grounds. It follows that the part-time version of a full-time occupation often involves a poorer employment contract, which should be reflected in its class categorization. Many part-time employees say they want to work more hours (1.5 million of those classified by ONS as in part-time work: mid-September 2013), that their pay levels are unfairly low, and (particularly among women recommencing paid employment after child bearing) that they have the skills and previous experience to work in more senior posts. Thus even if taking on part-time work is the expression of a preference (Hakim 2000, 2006), the nature of the employment relationship among part-timers is qualitatively different from full-time paid employment.

By extension, part-time employment under the terms of zero hours contracts is a further step away from class as indicated by full-time employment. Zero hours contracts (which often specify that co-terminus paid employment with another employer is forbidden) place the worker ‘on call’ to be summoned at short notice to work, but guarantees no regular or minimum hours of weekly employment. Not only does this deny workers the opportunity to plan ahead or cover for regular financial commitments, but it places additional discretionary powers in the hands of managers and supervisors, who are free to discriminate unfairly against individuals by denying them work or allocating them the least attractive hours or tasks. In short, zero hours contracts are not only about the distributional inequalities of class, but also add to the power in-balance between employer and employee, and worker exploitation. There is currently no reliable evidence about the number of individuals on zero hours contracts in Britain. ONS figures suggest a quarter of a million (although this estimate is under
review at the time of writing); the media have adopted the figure of one million and rising; and one Trade Union leader at the 2013 TUC Conference put his estimate as high as five million. Part-time and zero hours contracts are problematic for both NS-SeC and GBCS.

A similar, if not entirely original, point can be made about the unemployed, and people in training. The fore-runners of NS-SeC tended to regard unemployment as a temporary interruption of a continuing class position: for example, the Nuffield Mobility Study, using an early version of the Goldthorpe schema, coded current occupation, or ‘last occupation’ if its informants were unemployed at the time of interview. This common practice (a procedure which I have indeed used in my own previous research) means that redundant or unemployed ship-builders, miners or steel-men remain ship-builders, miners or steel-men for the purposes of many studies and official statistical counts, long after their industries have disappeared, unless they start a different new job or can be re-classified as ‘economically inactive’.

NS-SeC acknowledges the case for using ‘last job’, but is logically consistent in recommending that the long term unemployed ‘should be assigned to L14.2 on the grounds that they are excluded from employment relations’ (ONS 2013). Thus Class 8, which includes L14.2, is a somewhat heterogeneous category, containing the long-term unemployed who wish to be employed (despite it being ‘not possible to define the long-term unemployed in any hard and fast way’) and those who have never worked. However, class 8 does not include other people who are economically inactive: short-term unemployed people; retired people; those looking after a home; those on government employment or training schemes; and people who are sick or disabled: ‘(T)he normal procedure is to classify these people according to their last main job’.

Students are likewise denied their own social class, being deemed to remain in the same class as their parents. However, apprentices have been attributed to the skilled occupations which they hope to attain on completion of their training. This may be less a problem in a post-industrial economy with fewer 3- or 5-year apprenticeship schemes than when heavy industry and manufacturing provided many more jobs, but the idea that the lowly class situation of apprentices is the same as men in skilled trades flies in the face of all accounts from those who underwent the ritual humiliations of apprenticeship, or were laid off as soon as they became qualified for full rates of pay at the age of 21.

At the time of writing there are no published sources to indicate how GBCS deals with these problems. At one level, GBCS could be considered less vulnerable than NS-SeC over the handling of part-time work, unemployment, and training because its classes are not built exclusively on the basis of employment relations/contracts. However, the comparisons between classes (Savage et al 2013, 233-245) discuss income and assets, which are likely to suffer when people are not in full-time employment. It is also the case that in as far as the indicators of cultural capital reflect taste and consumption behaviour, the financial well-being of individuals interacts with their cultural engagement.

**Some problems of constructing class schema: pragmatics of usage**

These limitations of NS-SeC notwithstanding, GBCS has to concede advantage on grounds of practicality. The former’s core strength lies in conceptualising and then operationalising class as a very small cluster of features involved in the employment contract. This simplicity of formal definition supports the claim that it separates class from other topics we seek to analyse like health, housing, income, or education (or indeed, social or cultural capitals) so avoiding cross-contamination between independent and dependent variables. Even if one doubts how water-tight this separation actually is, NS-SeC is certainly a relatively more straightforward product than GBCS.

Despite the caveats entered above, NS-SeC is a well-grounded, intensively-researched and established tool: its rules for utilisation are relatively clear and concise, and it is supported by a permanent team of statisticians at
ONS. If we are studying class per se – as in the GBCS, the mobility studies of the 1970s, the Marshall et al ‘Essex’ study – the precision achieved through expenditure of time and resources can be justified. But when class is only a subsidiary variable, the pragmatic way forward for most researchers is to employ a more basic approach.

NS-SeC can be used in four versions. The ‘full’ version requires eight questions: three on occupation and five on employment status/size of organisation. They are designed to harmonise the collection of data across interview surveys. Other harmonised questions can be used to identify students and the long-term unemployed (ONS 2010, 17).

The ‘reduced’ version uses six of the questions; the ‘simplified’, three; and the ‘self-completion’ four questions (for details see ONS 2010). The levels of agreement between the full version and the others vary: 99 per cent for the reduced, 88 per cent for the simplified and 75 per cent for the self-completion. This inconsistency is unwelcome, but the research topic will determine which version generates the appropriate quality of classification. In any version, NS-SeC offers inter-study ‘harmonisation’, and as we noted above, options for collapsing or expanding across category-sets in a consistent manner. Compared with the multi-dimensionality of GBCS, the data collection and processing involved in using NS-SeC offers huge advantages in cost, simplicity of application, comparability and indeed sociological reasoning. The problems with the BBC Class Calculator show how difficult it is to reduce the sophistication of the GBCS to a handful of indicator questions.

But opting for the pragmatic solution leaves us with the fundamental problem of whether occupational groupings and employment contracts adequately encapsulate the essence of social class, and can properly encompass all members of society. Furthermore, the image of Britain which NS-SeC produces may not be the most useful in either visualising UK society today, or for tackling theoretical issues around social transformation and class dynamics. I have highlighted the ‘new’ class sub-divisions, the elite and the precariat, the traditional working class, the emergent service workers, and the new affluent workers, as being particular strengths of GBCS which may serve us better.

These classes suggest a potentially more informative picture of Britain today, following the collapse of the old working class and their institutions, than the traditional schema. When the economic activities of agricultural production or manufacturing industry in a society go into decline – so far a universal sociological law – their characteristic social relations, processes and institutions are also inevitably necessarily modified. As I observed recently, there is no place for the old working class social institutions of employment protection through strong trade unions and long craft apprenticeships; moral values learned in Non-Conformist Chapels; social solidarity through kinship, neighbouring and friendship in residential concentrations of occupational communities; intellectual development through evening classes and the WEA; and political expression through a Left of Centre Labour Party (Payne 2012b, 41).

When the most common female job was domestic servant and most married women were housewives, with two-thirds of all paid employees in routine manual work, Britain was a different kind of society from now, where most women, other than those raising very young children, are in paid employment, and only one-third of the labour force is employed in manual work.

GBCS begins to sketch the new forms of class which have been quietly evolving in a post-industrial, service, consumerist society, in which the political hopes of the new middle class (not least sociologists like Daniel Bell) have been sorely disappointed by the re-emergence of the capitalist class whose resources place them in a superior position to deploy the new tools of mass manipulation. It will be interesting to see how far the
Bourdieusian capitals can be institutionalised for each new class, as were the former working class social institutions.

**Is BGCS a class schema?**

There is insufficient space here to discuss the fundamental principles in class analysis, or the intricacies of Bourdieu’s notions of social and cultural capitals. In the case of the former, this ignores awkward questions about whether GBCS is measuring social status rather than social class (Scott 2013). In the case of latter, we are left with the highly simplified question of whether the operational indicators of these capitals are adequate for their task in GBCS. Has the chosen operationalisation of BGCS strayed too far into consumption behaviour, as I have implied? One’s answer probably relies on how one reads the detail of Bourdieu’s theoretical model, and of course one’s stance within the wider sociological perspective. Do we primarily view class as existing in continual re-enactment through processes of distinction and taste, or do we emphasise class as the pre-existing condition of social inequality under capitalism which determines consumption behaviour, thus treating class reproduction as being about intergenerational maintenance of opportunity and advantage, rather than mundane social interaction?

My observations in earlier sections of this article will have indicated my own interests in the macro-sociological or political economy issues of how many classes exist, and how their memberships are achieved, i.e. in historical changes in employment opportunities under evolving forms of capitalist societies; in social mobility; and in the social inequalities in life chances this entails. It follows that the GBCS description of British Society in 2011 is attractive. Nonetheless, in practical terms at this point, NS-SeC provides us with a handier analytical tool for carrying out research into other variables’ patterns, associations and even causes, even if the pragmatic advantages of NS-SeC are nonetheless constrained by the kind of tool it actually is. Useful though a hammer is, one should not try to use it to saw wood, but for the moment, GBCS looks too sophisticated to be a conventional class classificatory schema. The juxtaposition of the two approaches helps to bring out their relative strengths and weaknesses in terms of validity and reliability, showing that GBCS works well as a map of status groups, but less fluently as a class schema, while NS-SeC, warts and all, is a compact and coherent, but cramped class classification.

It may be that there is scope for future cross-fertilisation of ideas as GBCS and NS-SeC are refined, but not everyone will be happy with this article’s eclectic selection from, and mash up of, the two approaches. As academics we have been trained to work towards precision and consistency in our thinking and concept construction, but the more we seek these goals, and when/if we apply the same principles to evaluating our methods of social research (Payne 2012a), the further we move away from the mundane experiences and interpretations of the non-sociologists who are our research subjects. The underlying similarities of the schemes, which this article noted above, reflect the way that class at a very general level remains at the heart of both daily life and academic sociology.

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