

Recent Findings of Research in Economic & Social History

In contrast to the longstanding fascination of sociologists with the subject, British historians have given little attention to social mobility. In this article Andrew Miles explains why mobility is a significant factor in economic and social change, and reports some of the major findings from the first systematic analysis of historical social mobility in England.

Social Mobility in nineteenth-century England

Social mobility is the process by which individuals transfer between economic and social groups. They do this by entering and moving between occupations, and also if and when they marry. Their paths can be plotted either by comparing the positions held at various points over an individual lifetime, or, as is more commonly done, between generations. Social mobility is a familiar phenomenon to current generations of Britons. In the early 1970s, according to the major postwar survey of mobility patterns conducted by John Goldthorpe and his colleagues at Nuffield College, Oxford, some 70 per cent of people in England and Wales were to be found in a different social class to the one in which they had been born.[1]

However, the significance of social mobility extends beyond the personal concerns of particular individuals and their families; for it is the overall pattern of mobility which gives shape and structure to society as a whole. The very integrity of social groups and classes is dependent on the rate of movement between them and therefore, it is argued, mobility can have far-reaching economic, social and political consequences. In this sense, most observers have stressed that too little mobility is disruptive, because it encourages distinct and potentially antagonist social identities. But others have argued the precise opposite: that very mobile societies can be unstable, because they sponsor disorientation and alienation.

Social mobility and industrial society

It has always been assumed that past societies were less mobile than those of the present day. The 'liberal theory of industrialism' argues that the success, progress and stability of the modern liberal-capitalist system is inextricably bound up with rising rates of social mobility and greater equality of opportunity, or 'openness', both of which help to dissolve traditional class boundaries. [See, for example, 2.] Economic development, it is suggested, sponsors more mobility through an increasingly complex division of labour, and, with technological advance in a competitive market environment, industrial societies become increasingly dependent upon 'putting the right person in the right place'. Meritocracies are

more economically efficient, but also more politically stable, because the high rates of mobility they generate are very conspicuous, and social selection by achievement rather than by ascription helps legitimise remaining inequalities of condition.

However, Goldthorpe's study of mobility in twenty-century Britain challenged this thesis. Although his findings confirm that the main trend in the pattern of mobility since the First World War had been a strong rise in upward mobility, he argues that this did not reduce the potential for class formation, not did it represent a shift towards greater equality of opportunities. While more people were leaving behind their working-class origins to take up middle-class jobs, Goldthorpe pointed out that the lack of movement in the opposite direction was making the working class increasingly second-generation in character. Moreover, because the sons of middle-class men were finding it easier to follow in their father's footsteps, the middle class was becoming more stable. The crucial variable here was the expansion in the number of professional and managerial positions in the economy over the course of the century, which allowed for greater upward mobility without altering the relative chances of men from different social backgrounds securing such a position. Thus, by the 1970s Britain had become a much more mobile society, but it was not classless, nor, in fact, had it become more open.

Samuel Smiles and the 'Land of Boundless Opportunity'

Goldthorpe's data were firmly rooted in the twentieth century, the

Andrew Miles is a Lecturer in Modern Social History at the University of Birmingham. He is co-editor of *Building European Society: Occupational Change and Social Mobility in Europe* (1993) and co-author of *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840-1940* (1994).

oldest person interviewed in his study having been born in 1908. Nevertheless, comparisons with other present-day, but less-developed, industrial societies inclined him to the view that the patterns he had uncovered in contemporary Britain had deeper historical roots.

Until very recently, such claims had never been subjected to systematic empirical scrutiny in this country. Mobility has often been invoked to help explain events in the British past, but, in contrast to the strong traditions of research into historical social mobility in continental Europe and in North America, the production of evidence has been very patchy.

The strongest contemporary images of social mobility in Victorian Britain come from the writings of Samuel Smiles, whose popular text extolled the virtues of a society in which, so he claimed, there were no social barriers for those who were willing to apply the principles of 'self help'. What some men are,' wrote Smiles, 'all without difficulty might be.' [3]

Historians have generally taken a sceptical view of this claim. Harold Perkin, for example, argued that, although there were still good opportunities for advancement in mid-Victorian Britain, the prospects for upward mobility were, nevertheless, worse than they had ever been.[4] This claim was given some statistical weight by Michael Sanderson's study of early industrial Lancashire, which concluded that the factory system closed down avenues of mobility for working-class children.[5]

For the second half of the nineteenth- century, the main source of data on social mobility rates comes from local studies designed to test Eric Hobsbawm's thesis about the Victorian 'labour aristocracy'. This evidence broadly supports the existence of a skilled- worker elite which interacted more readily with the petty bourgeoisie than with the rest of the working class. But it also suggests that, in the more troubled economic climate of the 1880s and 90s, and with the expansion of the white-collar sector within the lower middle class, skilled workers' horizons contracted.

Thus the main argument which can be distilled from existing empirical work suggests that the relationship between the process of industrialisation and social mobility was an antagonist one. Applying the assumptions of the liberal industrialismthesis, some have argued that Britain's relative economic decline is directly linked to the apparent demise of the comparatively open society of the late eighteenth century which gave rise to pioneering industrial entrepreneurs.

Intergenerational mobility

Mobility between generations can be measured using marriage certificates, which, after 1836, had to record the occupations of the partners and parents involved in each ceremony. The following discussion is based on a sample of ten thousand marriage records collected from across the country for a recent study of national mobility patterns during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[6]

When the occupational titles of the participants in these ceremonies are organised into five social classes, based upon an adapted version of the 1951 census scheme, some very strong patterns are evident. In the first place, it can be seen (see Table 1) that social stability was the norm: as they walked up the aisle, sons were more likely than not to be in the same class as their father. However, there was also a clear and accelerating increase in the amount of mobility occurring over time, upward mobility included.

What, though, does this trend imply about the process of class formation in nineteenth-century Britain, and does it necessarily mean that Britain was amore open society in 1914 than it had been seventy-five years earlier? In order to answer these questions we need to identify, in terms of the boundaries between classes, where the rising flow of mobility was focused, and what actually accounted for it.

As to the first issue, Figure I shows that there was a steady increase in the rate of upward mobility between the working class and the middle class, but that this type of mobility remained quite unusual: during the period 1899-1914 less than 8 per cent of the sons of working class men moved out of the class and into middle class occupations. Moreover, virtually all those crossing this boundary were destined only for the shopkeeping and clerking

Table 1: Total Mobility Rate of Men by Marriage Cohort (percentage by column)

Percentage of Grooms in:	Date of Marriage					n
	1839-54	1859-74	1879-94	1899-1914	All	
Same class as father	67.8	65.2	60.8	54.0	62.2	6345
Different class from father	32.2	34.8	39.2	46.0	37.8	3865

ranks of the lower middle class. Smiles' 'rags to riches' heroes were, in fact, a very rare breed: even in 1914 the chances of a labourer's son becoming a member of the professional or propertied upper middle class were 500:1 against. Much more common, and becoming considerably more so over time, was movement between working-class groups (see Figure 1: 'mobile within the class'). The main effect of the overall rise in mobility rates then was to blur the skill-based divisions within the working class. The result was a clear process of homogenisation, or what is called 'demographic class formation'.

As we know from Goldthorpe's work, more mobility may not make a society more open, or 'fluid', in the sense that the relative life chances of people from different backgrounds become more equal. This all depends upon how much of the increase in mobility is 'required' by wider structural factors and, in particular, on the changing shape of the division of labour. In the case of later nineteenth-century Britain, for example, we know that the growth of the service-sector created a demand for more transport workers and clerks: this could account for the increased rates of mobility between the working class and the middle class, and also the tendency for men born into skilled or unskilled working-class families to become semiskilled workers themselves.

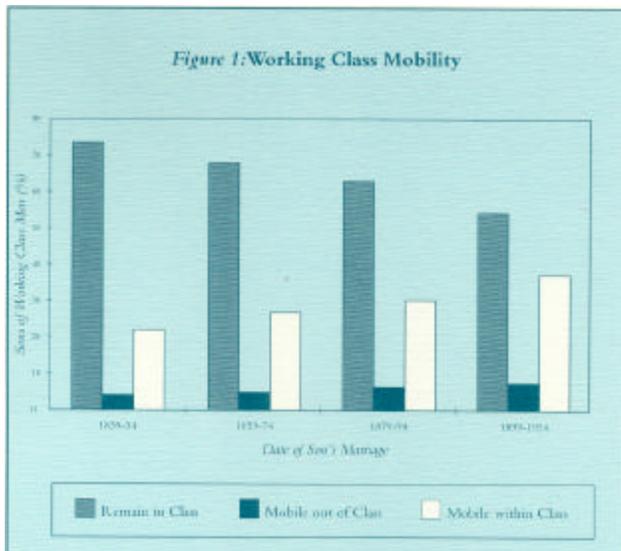
By applying statistical techniques which can control for such exogenous influences, it becomes clear that very little of the increase in mobility evident in Table I can be explained in this way. Indeed, if the changing shape of the economy had been the only force at play, the total mobility rate would only have risen from 32 per cent to 34 per cent, rather than the 14 percentage point increase that actually occurred. So, not only did the English become more mobile between 1839 and 1914, but they did so largely because English society became more open.

Career mobility

Patterns of work-life, or career, mobility are much harder to trace in historical context. The census offers one solution, but it is often difficult to link individuals between enumerations, which in any case only took place at ten year intervals. Another approach is to use autobiographies which, although they do not provide a representative sample of the population, can offer detailed records of complete career histories.

A study of almost 500 texts and abstracts sampled from Burnett, Vincent and Mayall's anthology of working-class autobiography confirms the growing bureaucratisation of the labour market in the last third of the nineteenth century.[7] Whereas the careers of almost half the writers born in the eighteenth century involved at least one major shift in employment, and those of a further one in six showed no discernable pattern whatsoever, men born after 1865 were more likely than their fathers to have experienced stable, structured, and linear career pathways (see Table 2).

Over the same period, the mechanisms by which people found and were recruited to jobs also changed in ways which reflected increasingly modern practices. The informal devices of patronage, word-of-mouth, and family influence retained considerable



A more open society

How can this trend towards a more fluid social structure be explained? In the absence of any significant social engineering undertaken by the State during the nineteenth century there are three, inter-related, factors which seem particularly important: the growth of basic educational skills, the process of urbanisation, and, above all, the changes occurring in the occupational composition of classes.

With the rise of services, in what has been called the era of 'organised capitalism' from the 1870s, the importance of capital as the main means of gaining entry to the middle class began to decline. As parts of the economy became increasingly bureaucratised, educational credentials started to become more important in the process of recruitment to the expanding white-collar and lower professional sectors. In this context, declining class differentials in literacy, augmented by expansion in the provision of elementary education, enhanced the competitiveness of those with working-class backgrounds.

However, the effects of these changes were felt beyond the middle class. Within the skilled working class, the traditional craft sector was in decline, and the erosion of the apprenticeship system continued. The trades were gradually supplanted by the larger-scale manufacturing and mining sectors, in which the role of family influence and personal recommendation was reduced, and by the 'uniformed working class' centred on the developing bureaucracies of the railway companies, post office and police force, where literacy was a basic entry requirement.

It is also likely that the continuing process of urbanisation, a process with which the developing service economy was inextricably entwined, encouraged the trend towards more open recruitment. In contrast to the more limited opportunities and restrictive traditions of the countryside, the growth of towns stimulated a flow of people and information which broadened horizons, increased expectations, and made available a greater range of more diverse occupations.

Table 2: Career Typologies by Period, 1723-1914

Career Models:	Autobiographer's Date of Birth				n
	1723-1815	1816-1864	1865-1914	all	
Entrepreneurial	19.2	17.9	11.3	(15.9)	76
Professional	17.3	14.0	19.0	(16.5)	79
Union-political	0.0	14.0	7.1	(8.6)	41
Bureaucratic	0.0	4.8	16.1	(7.7)	37
Fractured	46.2	44.0	41.7	(43.6)	209
Shapeless	17.3	25.0	4.8	(7.7)	37
n	104	207	168		479

Notes: 'Fractured' refers to at least one major shift in employment; 'Shapeless' refers to those displaying no discernable employment pattern.

importance well into the twentieth century, but whereas advertisements, interviews and examinations were hardly mentioned at all by writers born before 1865, between a fifth and a third of those entering the labour market after this date did so.

Women's social mobility

Proportionally-speaking, few of the autobiographies in the Burnett, Vincent and Mayall anthology were written by women),

whose reporting of formal work experience tended, in any case, to be much more limited than that of the male authors. Likewise, women's occupations were rarely entered in the marriage certificates. However, it could be argued that this is less of a problem for the study of mobility than it appears.

The comparative silence about women's work in the past may simply reflect its relative lack of economic and social importance. Sociologists like Goldthorpe argue that, even in the late twentieth century, their subordination in the labour market means that most women derive their class position from the male head of the

How can we reconcile the apparent contradiction between the findings of the marriage register analysis and Goldthorpe's conclusion that there has been no trend in fluidity during the present century? One possibility is that the marriage sample gives a misleading impression overall because it is composed of men only half way through their careers. Analysis of a much smaller subset of older grooms is inconclusive on this point. However, the autobiographies show that key social transitions were often made before the average age of marriage, and that contemporary notions

of 'occupational maturity' may, in any case, be largely inappropriate for the mostly pension-less nineteenth century. New research on the development of bureaucratic employment structures in the first half of the twentieth century is also suggesting why a trend towards greater fluidity might have been halted after the First World War, as the importation of women into routine white-collar positions and the new emphasis on credentialism was used to defend and enhance middle-class career prospects.

Finally, the significance of a trend towards greater equality of opportunity, and therefore a more meritocratic society, before 1914 remains unclear. After all, the British economy went into relative decline regardless. Of course, huge disparities in life chances between men of different social backgrounds remained, and it is likely that there is a threshold effect in the relationship between social fluidity and economic efficiency. However, what might be of more relevance is the homogenisation of working-class experience.

The cultural and institutional consequences of the process of demographic class formation, giving rise to a combative labour movement, a particular pattern of industrial relations and, by the inter-war period, a set of 'conventional wisdoms' [8] which reinforced class divisions, may simply have outweighed any beneficial effects to the economy of declining inequalities of opportunity.

Reference

- [1] **J. H. Goldthorpe**, *Social Mobility and Class Structure in Modern Britain* (1987).
- [2] **P.M. Blau & O.D. Duncan**, *The American Occupational Structure* (1967).
- [3] **Samuel Smiles**, *Self Help* (1859)
- [4] **H. Perkin**, *Origins of Modern English Society* (1985).
- [5] **M. Sanderson**, 'Literacy and Social Mobility in the Industrial Revolution in England', *Past and Present*, 56: August (1972).
- [6] **A. Miles**, *Occupational and Social Mobility in England, 1839-1914*, (forthcoming 1997),
- [7] **J. Burnett, D. Vincent & D. Mayall**, *The Autobiography of the Working Class. Volume 1: 1790-1900* (1984).
- [8] **R. McKibbin**, *The Ideologies of Class* (1990), chapter 9.

Table 3: Total Mobility Rate of Women by Marriage Cohort (percentage by column)

Percentage of Brides marry-ing into:	Date of Marriage					n
	1839-54	1859-74	1879-94	1899-1914	All	
Same class as father	56.6	53.1	50.4	55.0	51.3	5205
Different class from father	43.4	46.9	49.6	44.2	48.7	4951

household in which they live, whether that be their father or their husband. According to this view, the vast majority of women only become socially mobile in the marriage market, as they leave the parental household to form a new conjugal family.

This perspective on mobility can be generated from the marriage certificates by comparing the groom's occupation with that of his father-in-law. Such an analysis reveals that women actually found it easier to move into a different class by marrying a husband of a different social standing than men did by moving between jobs (see Table 3 and compare with Table 1). The difference was not great in the case of mobility between the working class and the middle class, but the skill-based polarities inside the former were much less important for women than for men.

This suggests a somewhat ambiguous role for women in the process of mobility. On the one hand, they were more effective than men in forging closer relationships between status groups within the working class, thereby encouraging demographic class formation. At the same time, however, women were more likely to jeopardise class cohesion by entering into 'mixed' marriages' across the major social divide. It may also be the case that working-class women who did not marry, and who therefore cannot be captured by this type of analysis, had better opportunities for upward mobility than their brothers through routes provided by school teaching and lower-grade Civil Service employment.

Conclusions

In sum, and in contrast to received historiographical wisdom, the rate of social mobility in nineteenth and early twenty-century England increased steadily. As it did so, English society also became more open. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the particular pattern of the changing mobility flows encouraged a process of working-class formation. This was a process both assisted and complicated by gender.