



Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais

ISSN: 0102-6909

ISSN: 1806-9053

Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em
Ciências Sociais - ANPOCS

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Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais, vol. 34, no. 100, e3410010, 2019
Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais - ANPOCS

DOI: 10.1590/3410010/2019

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New class divisions? Elites and the precariat at the extremes of social class in the UK


Novas divisões de classe? As elites e o precariado nos extremos das classes sociais no Reino Unido

SAVAGE, Mike (ed.). *Social Class in the 21st Century*. London, Pelican Books, 2015. 449 pp.

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DOI: 10.1590/3410010/2019

Social Class in the 21st Century is the latest book from Mike Savage, co-authored alongside Niall Cunningham, Fiona Devine, Sam Friedman, Daniel Laurison, Lisa McKenzie, Andrew Miles, Helene Snee and Paul Wakeling. Published in 2015, the work brings us up to date with the latest methodological possibilities of approaching contemporary social divisions and inequalities in light of current day societal structures, with a focus on those at the top ('the wealth elite') and bottom ('the precariat') of social classes. Based on the data pulled from the BBC's Great British Class Survey (GBCS), carried out in 2011 by a large team of researchers led by Savage (London School of Economics) and Devine (University of Manchester), the book offers not only an updated and detailed view of social divisions in the UK, but explores what these mean for dealing with social inequalities today.

Mike Savage, who was responsible for drafting the different chapters of the book into a cohesive narrative, has built his career on a long-standing dedication to understanding modern-day social class and inequalities, during the course of which

his research has developed a distinctively groundbreaking quality for the wider field. Departing from a long tradition in the discussion of class in English sociology, including an extensive debate regarding the limits of classifying social class exclusively in terms of professional occupation, Savage aggregated some of Bourdieu's perspective linked to different types of capital. At the heart of this discussion is how accentuated levels of inequality are reconstructing social classes in light of both the capitalist financialization experienced globally since the 1980s and the consolidation of neoliberalism as a model of economic, social and political organization. The book, placing itself in a void left along the trajectory of British class literature, is an essential reading not only to the sociologist but to any scholar hoping to grasp the complex shape and structure of class in Great Britain today.

The GBCS consisted of a large national survey, taken by approximately 161,000 Britons, the result of which provided the aggregated information in relation to three sets of data: economic, cultural and social capital. With the collected data, Savage and his colleagues divided classes in the UK into the seven groups corresponding to the distribution of capitals, which produced the following (Savage *et al.*, 2013, p. 230):

- Elite: Very high economic capital (especially savings), high social capital, very high high-brow cultural capital.
- Established middle class: High economic capital, high status of mean contacts, high high-brow and emerging cultural capital. They are a gregarious and culturally engaged class
- Technical middle class: High economic capital, very high mean social contacts, but relatively few contacts reported, moderate cultural capital. This is a new and small class, less culturally engaged
- New affluent workers: Moderately good economic capital, moderately poor mean score of social contacts, though high range, moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital. They are a young and active group
- Traditional working class: Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable

house price, few social contacts, low highbrow and emerging cultural capital. The average age of this class is older than the others

- Emergent service workers: Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable household income, moderate social contacts, high emerging (but low highbrow) cultural capital. This class are young and often found in urban areas
- Precariat: Poor economic capital, and the lowest scores on every other criterion.

Through these classification's characteristics, the GBCS team demonstrates how class position is no longer tethered to the traditional and simple variable of occupation, but involves complex and varying levels of a number of different types of capital grouped by economic, cultural and social elements. Even within the category of economic capital, the typical indication of occupational income is no longer enough to explain a social position, so elements regarding 'potential financial resources' such as savings, pensions, inheritance and property value must also be considered. Next, the GBCS looks at cultural capital, i.e. people's leisure interests, musical tastes, use of the media, and food preferences, totalling twenty-seven cultural activities. In relation to social capital, the approach is that of a 'position generator' "to measure the range of people's social ties. We asked respondents whether they knew anyone in 37 different occupations, which is the most complex and granular question of its type ever used in social research in any part of the world" (Savage *et al.* 2013, p. 250). This would separate those with a wider range of social ties to a narrower one, as well as separate those whose networks were concentrated on one or another area of the spectrum.

Various collections of published articles have discussed the class perspective underlying the research, from the methodology used to the end results (see the following special issues: *Sociological Review*, v. 63, issue 2, 2015; *Sociology*, n. 47, 2013; *Sociology*, n. 48, 2014, *Sociology*, n. 49, 2015). The discussions focused heavily on analysing the seven latent classes and tended to reify them, generating criticisms that reduced their explanatory potential.

Departing from this commentary, the book returned to the advantageous levels of data obtained in relation to the two extremes of the spectrum, the elite and the precariat, as a possible way of exploring the real boundaries produced by the specific social allocations at the highest and lowest levels of the class structure. It is at this point that the research truly presents itself as an innovator amidst the class debate, which traditionally turns to the interfaces and differences between the middle and working classes. In the current dynamic of financial capitalism, it becomes a sociological obligation to investigate the extremes and the almost total incompatibility of differentiated ownership of the types of capital that categorize each group and the socio-political processes engendered by their reproduction.

Social Class in the 21st Century fuses academic writing (structured in a way that answers questions on the team's school of thought, methodology, objectives, implications, and so on), a fully referenced historical perspective and a refreshing ability to draw upon an array of recognizable contemporary cultural and sociological phenomena. It places itself among numerous attempts at answering recent, if subverted, outcries for a new understanding of the chaotic social structure we live today, visible through popular social criticism, shifts in reality TV subjects, news topics, and academic research trends. Questions regarding the housing crisis, problems in the current schooling system, pay gaps, (over)qualification and job prospects, inheritance, and social mobility in the UK will all be addressed along the course of the publication.

The book is organized into four main parts, each divided into smaller chapters. The first, 'The History of Social Class', acts as a literature review and demonstrates the areas of social divisions that have been clouded by typical criteria and focus on inter-class relations, particularly between the middle and working classes, generally as they have been historically useful from an elite perspective. Introducing an analysis of class categories since the 19th century, this also functions to place Savage's dedication to a historical-sociological perspective at the centre of this research. Pausing at a shift in the 1960s, we are introduced to Bourdieu, amongst others, who led a break in the field by questioning the more abstract

notion of privilege, quantified through 'cultural' and 'social' capitals. Having set this rationality in place, Savage proposes his solution: contemporary investigations must adapt to cater to new variables at play in the construction of class categorizations in order to render inequalities more visible.

Part two, entitled 'Capitals, Accumulation and Social Class', focuses on a mixture of the GBCS data and interviews. Here, we are introduced to some of the newer elements at play in the formation of social class, namely the combination of economic (income, savings and house value), cultural (both highbrow and emerging) and social (networks and personal ties) capital. The chapter 'Accumulating Economic Capital' begins by exploring the British public's perception of economic divisions which "stamp themselves decisively in people's identities" (p. 64). It becomes obvious that economic accumulation is a process of long-term investment, whereby the position of those at the top are perpetuated by the strong correlations between extremely high incomes, savings and wealth. Increased economic capital in Britain has led to growing cohesions at the top and bottom of the spectrum, whereas the middle ranges fall into less coherent boundaries. Through the GBCS's data, the chapter also explores the increasing importance of financial factors beyond employment, such as geographical location, family and household situation and age.

The next chapter moves onto 'Highbrow and Emerging Cultural Capital' through a detailed exploration of the pathological identities and stereotypes that have been built in our cultural minds around certain leisurely activities and hobbies. Understanding cultural tastes to attach themselves to certain skills and abilities, Savage also explains how cultural capital interacts with the perpetuation of social classes and identities. In the chapter titled simply 'Social Capital', we are presented to one of the more perplexing factors of class related to 'who you know'. Dialoguing heavily with the GBCS data, this topic explains the complex relationship between social ties, their accumulation and the other two forms of capital. Although social networks are not strictly exclusive, they function much like economic capital in that they are accumulated long-term, and the largest differences can once again be seen in the top and bottom of the spectrum.

Drawing the three together, in the final chapter of the section, 'The New Landscape of Class', upon the assumption that all forms of capital tend to accumulate coincidentally, and reinforcing this with GBCS data, we are introduced to the project's more notable achievements: the production of the 'new' social class divisions detailed earlier. Most shocking perhaps is the pulling away of those at the bottom, and even more so at the top, signalling greater inequalities that are no longer described to a satisfactory degree by the typical focus on the middle class - working class boundary. Attention is drawn to the class labelled the 'precariat' (a precarious proletariat, as dubbed by Guy Standing) who are defined by financial dependence and insecurity. The top 10% of earners, on the other hand, will bring in nearly seventeen times more than the lowest 10%. Besides the more quantifiable data it produced, Savage's treatment of the various forms of capital often returns to the question of class identities and in doing so has opened up a number of questions regarding (self-) perception, where positions higher up the spectrum tend to denote greater political and cultural superiority and a greater confidence when it comes to manoeuvring through critical thinking. The phenomenon of 'emerging' culture, more pronounced among younger individuals, points to further proof that class identities are not necessarily transferred quite so smoothly between generations as financial capital is.

Here we move on to Part Three, which looks to 'Social Mobility, Education and Location'. The purpose of this section is that of de-mystifying a number of assumptions when it comes to mobility, which takes place in the chapter '*Climbing Mountains*'. Using the useful metaphor of a mountain, Savage explains that the extremely uneven distribution of all forms of capital gives a particular advantage to those who are born with capital accumulations, which essentially means they start their climb higher up, to begin with. Hence, a harsh meritocratic system based on those same advantageous characteristics makes it harder to climb and easier to slip for those further down. The question of meritocracy is taken further in the next chapter, 'A Tale of Two Campuses', where it is contextualized through university education. Threaded with

elements of spatiality throughout, this topic looks to the exclusivity of the university system, which although more accepting in numbers and social background than ever, works through a distinct set of criteria which maintain a tight political elite in wider society: “simply expanding the education system and making it easier for young people to go to university does not unsettle social hierarchies” (p. 256). Although not perfect, university qualifications do correspond somewhat with class categories. However, the most interesting matter explored in this chapter is that of *which* universities hold together this elite. Top accumulations of high-brow cultural and economic capital, as well as the vital London location, continue to be found in top universities, such as Cambridge, Durham, King’s College London, London School of Economics, Oxford and University College London (p. 254).

Finally, the UK’s spatial inequality is explored in the chapter ‘Class and Spatial Inequality’, in ways which exceed traditional stereotypes dividing the UK’s North and South regions. From the GBCS, Savage and his team understood that not only are there ‘highly segregated urban cores’ (p. 265) in every major British city but that London dominates to extreme degrees. As an example, the most expensive area in London (Kensington and Chelsea) boasts a mean house value of more than £1.5 million, over three times higher than that of the 20th ranked Hackney, which stands at around £400k (p. 82). Living in these spaces of higher property value, especially London, also increases educational, occupational, social and cultural opportunities, leading Savage to dub the city a ‘vortex’ (p. 297). Keeping in mind the UK’s growing housing crisis and homelessness levels, it is interesting that geography interweaves with both social and cultural class, as well as judgement and snobbery: interviews also uncovered that people’s perceptions of economic inequality are often discussed in terms of others’ geographical location (p. 84).

Throughout the book, Savage and his team make it clear they are aware of their methodological limitations. The survey itself, for example, attracted an exaggerated skew on the side of the very wealthy, and an apprehension from the poorer areas of British society. The team used this to their

advantage, understanding this clear public commentary as a reflection on notions of class. This is dealt with in ‘The Class Divide in 21st Century Britain’, a final and conclusive part to the book which focuses predominantly on those at the top and bottom, the elite and the precariat. Essentially, this is a reminder that historically, we have been accustomed to a picture of the elite which no longer corresponds with reality, and which affects not only our understanding but our options for dealing with inequality. Moving away from the more cohesive ‘landed gentlemanly’ class of the past, the chapter ‘The View at the Top’ demonstrates how our new elite has grown to include a range of occupations and social backgrounds, though it remains very exclusive. The precariat, called ‘the missing people’ of the survey, also earn a chapter and sociological profiling in ‘The Precarious Precariat’. This area of British society is presented as misunderstood due to snobbery, shame and stigma, and as misrepresented due to socio-political alienation.

Here we reach one of the final themes of the work, ‘Class Consciousness and the New Snobbery’. In this last section before the concluding comments and summaries, the text makes it clear that a complete and reflective definition of class in Britain today is not only lacking in scholarly literature but in the public mind, too. As a result, deep-rooted but subconscious admissions of class identity, denied or in hiding partially due to British culture itself, appear through so-called ‘emotional politics’. Stereotypes based on appearance, accent and even the ability to analyse are visible in everyday language and media representations, creating antagonisms between classes. Like our understanding of class itself, class relations have become host to frustrated attempts at dealing with the unknown.

The important thing to remember is that this book is but a part of a much larger and ongoing project. Presenting the data of the GBCS as well as opening a more detailed debate into the elite and precariat of Great Britain were the main goals of this particular publication, but also, and as a response to some of the main findings of the project itself, it becomes obvious that Savage and his team aimed to bring class back into public debate. And that they did. The research of the GBCS itself

created waves of repercussions for online engagement, academic debate and criticism, national and international news. While reviewers have been as engaged and intrigued by the results as the media has, the book is not without minor criticisms, be it for methodological approaches (Ainley, 2015), representation (Riding, 2015), the abandonment of Marxist notions of exploitation (Thomas, 2016), or its readability for non-academic audiences (Colville, 2015).

At a time when radicalised utopias often cloud the effectivity of ideological arguments coming from either side of the political spectrum, Savage's efforts are especially welcomed. While the hardship of social inequalities in the UK and globally are often denied or swept aside as cries for unnecessary social investment, the strong data produced here not only gives these immense shifts the quantifiable evidence they need, but demonstrates a number of very real trends that must be dealt with academically.

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