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Article:

Renwick, Chris orcid.org/0000-0001-9672-6671 (2019) "Movement, Space, and Social Mobility in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain". *Cultural and Social History: the Journal of the Social History Society*. pp. 13-28. ISSN: 1478-0038

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2019.1574050>

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Movement, Space, and Social Mobility in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain

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The enthusiasm for creating new and different histories of social mobility has grown at a moment when sociologists in Britain have been engaged in a high-profile project to update the models of class they have used for more than 50 years. While these endeavours intersect at numerous points, including their shared interest in reusing old social survey data, they are also framed by the same intellectual ambition: to envision class and social mobility as multi-dimensional phenomena. As this article argues, these developments recall the infancy of British social mobility research, when the relationships between disciplines, institutions, and ideas had yet to take the shape we now recognise. Exploring how social researchers measured and conceptualised class in a wide variety of ways during the first three decades of the twentieth century, the article argues that the drift towards focusing on vertical movement through social space was a product of both a particular set of social science methods and the political ideas they were intended to support.

Keywords: social mobility; social surveys; research methods; class

In 1927 Alexander Carr-Saunders (1886-1966) and David Caradog Jones (1883-1975), two social scientists based at the University of Liverpool, published *A Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales*. The book synthesised a wide array of statistics to describe the two countries in fine-grain detail, including how the population was distributed geographically, the kind of work people did, and the amount of money they earned doing it. In doing so, Carr-Saunders and Jones considered two wildly different conclusions about how people were ordered in society.

On the one hand a caste system is possible. Under such a régime the ‘untouchables’ at one end of the scale perform the menial services, and to the sons of the ‘untouchables’ no other career is open. At the other end, privileges are confined to a favoured group and their descendants. Various societies have from time to time been organized on lines corresponding more or less closely to this state of things. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine a society which is no respecter of persons, where the members somehow get into just those occupations for which they are best suited no matter what the standing of parents may be. Such a state of society has in many countries at many times been envisaged as an ideal to be striven for, but nowhere, as yet, has it been substantially realized.

Carr-Saunders and Jones were certain that they wanted England and Wales to be as close to the second of these two extremes as possible. However, and despite all their hard work, they did not know where to position the countries on this spectrum. The reason was not only ‘an almost complete lack of statistical information regarding the rise and fall [of individuals] in the social scale’ but social researchers’ failure to reach consensus on how envisage that social scale in the first place.¹

Social mobility, as these movements through the social space are now known, captured the imagination of many politicians and social commentators during the late twentieth century, with ‘meritocracy’ becoming a much-misunderstood buzzword.² An

¹ Alexander Carr-Saunders and David Caradog Jones, *A Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales* (London, 1927), p. 142-3.

² The term ‘meritocracy’ was, of course, popularised by Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2033. An Essay on Education and Equality* (London, 1958). For more on its history see the supplement to volume 77 (2006) of *Political Quarterly*, which was published separately as Geoff Dench (ed.), *The Rise and Rise of Meritocracy* (Oxford, 2006).

essential element of that enthusiasm was, and still is, the idea that social structure is organised in a relatively simple linear hierarchy and that talent and ability should drive individuals upwards through it, with success judged by the rates of mobility that are achieved. Yet social scientists – in particular sociologists such as David Glass, A. H. Halsey, and John Goldthorpe – have always developed much more complex and dynamic models of social space and movement than the ones that underpin such folk conceptions.³ For example, while sociologists have made distinctions between things such as absolute and relative social mobility, they have also complained about the drift toward seeing social mobility almost entirely in terms of income scales – economists’ preferred measure.⁴

As this paper will show, these recent debates have been shaped profoundly by early twentieth-century developments, when social mobility research came to utilise a specific set of categories. Operating at the intersection of biological and social science, and making do with limited resources, the first social mobility researchers had to find a way of conceptualising class that enabled it to be measured. Progress on that problem placed a number of constraints on what could be known about the subject, including how people thought about movements between classes. But the practical challenge of measurement was not the only factor that shaped the direction of the field: the categories that were eventually used for these purposes, most notably occupation, which

³ David Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain* (London, 1954); A. H. Halsey, A. F. Heath, and J. M. Ridge, *Origins and Destinations: Family, Class, and Education in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1980); John H. Goldthorpe, Catriona Llewellyn, and Clive Payne, *Social Mobility and the Class Structure in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 1980).

⁴ For an excellent recent survey of the differences between social scientific and popular political understandings of social mobility see Peter Mandler, ‘Educating the Nation III: Social Mobility’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26 (2016): 1-23. For more on the difference between sociologists’ and economists’ perceptions of social mobility see John H. Goldthorpe, ‘Understanding – and Misunderstanding – Social Mobility in Britain: The Entry of Economists, the Confusion of Politicians, and the Limits of Educational Policy’, *Journal of Social Policy* 42 (2013): 431-50.

underpinned ways of thinking about social mobility after the Second World War, proved a useful vessel for researchers' assumptions and prejudices.

Surveying an early twentieth-century social science landscape in which the study of class was tied to interests in a range of other issues, and building on Mike Savage's work on the 'technical identity' at the heart of British social science after the Second World War, the three sections that follow chart an important part of the history of how social mobility research developed in the period, from its origins in work on differential fertility, to the interests of social scientists and reformers in education and professions, to efforts to translate static descriptions of society into dynamic models.⁵ As we will see, given questions about social mobility are also questions about how we can know about social mobility, conceptualising it as a vertical process taking place in a hierarchically organised social space was a product of not only a shared, though sometimes diverging, politics – progressive and managerial in equal measure – but also the material resources that social researchers had at their disposal.

Reproduction, Occupation, and Class

Britain had been shocked by the scale of poverty revealed by social investigators such as Charles Booth in London and Seebohm Rowntree in York during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. But while some people pondered the ethical implications of so much suffering, others were more concerned with other matters. Some commentators, particularly those associated with the nascent eugenics movement, were convinced that mass poverty was somehow linked to the trebling of the population, to

⁵ Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford, 2010)

37 million, that had taken place during the century after 1801, when the census was first taken. In particular, they believed mass poverty was evidence that Britain was in danger of being overwhelmed by the lowest – and, according to anecdotal evidence, most fertile – class of people. Such fears found their apotheosis in the response to the Boer War, in particular the army recruitment scandal, which led to the creation of the Interdepartmental Committee on Physical Deterioration in 1904 and helped generate enthusiasm for ‘National Efficiency’.⁶

The biostatistician Karl Pearson (1857-1936), who was based at University College London throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was one of the most prominent figures to engage with these issues. A leading figure in the biometrics movement, a group of biologists and statisticians who believed that evolutionary problems such as variation and selection could only be tackled with statistical tools, Pearson had been inspired to apply his immense mathematical skills to humans by Francis Galton’s work on eugenics, in particular his 1889 book *Natural Inheritance*. The result was a research programme, based first in his Biometric Laboratory and then Eugenics Record Office, later renamed the Galton Laboratory for National Eugenics, at UCL, which proved hugely influential for both biology and the social sciences.⁷

A technocratic socialist and convinced Darwinist, Pearson believed that competition should be central to the future of British society. However, his understanding of how competition worked in human societies was guided by two other

⁶ Richard A. Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration: Eugenics and the Declining Birthrate in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Chapel Hill, 1995), ch. 3.

⁷ For more on Pearson’s life see Theodore M. Porter, *Karl Pearson: The Scientific Life in a Statistical Age* (Princeton, NJ, 2004). For more on Pearson’s research programme see: Jean Gayon, *Darwinism’s Struggle for Survival: Heredity and the Hypothesis of Natural Selection* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 197-319; William B. Provine, *The Origins of Theoretical Population Genetics*, 2nd edn (Chicago: 1971), chs 2-3; Donald MacKenzie, *Statistics in Britain, 1865-1939. The Social Construction of Scientific Knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1981), chs 5 & 6.

ideas. One was his belief, seemingly *pace* Darwin, that competition between groups was much more important than competition between individuals.⁸ The other, which he explained in his 1897 essay “Reproductive Selection”, was that reproduction was potentially much more important than natural selection in determining the character of groups. If people or organisms possessing a particular characteristic reproduced more than other people or organisms possessing either a different characteristic or the same one in a different degree or intensity, Pearson argued, then evolution could change direction, regardless of that trait’s adaptive qualities. He named the result – the situation in which fertility itself was a potential origin of new types or species – ‘reproductive’ or ‘genetic’ selection.⁹

Working on this idea, Pearson developed a hugely influential population model in which the reproductive capacity of 25% of each generation produced 50% of the members of the next. Although this model quickly acquired the status of fact among sympathetic biostatisticians, translating the biological idea of variation into socio-economic and political contexts was an immensely complex challenge. Was high fertility a trait possessed by single coherent group that would be recognised as such by other social researchers? Furthermore, with official statistics showing the crude birthrate – the number children born per 1,000 members of the population – in decline during the late nineteenth century, going from a record high of 36.3 in 1876 to 28.5 in 1901, could

⁸ On his belief in the greater significance of group competition in the modern world see Pearson, *National Life from the Standpoint of Science* (London, 1901).

⁹ Pearson, ‘Reproductive Selection’, in Karl Pearson, *The Chances of Death and other Studies in Evolution*, vol. 1 (London, 1897), pp. 63-102; Karl Pearson, Alice Lee and Leslie Bramley-Moore, ‘Mathematical Contributions to the Theory of Evolution. VI. Genetic (Reproductive) Selection. Inheritance of Fertility in Man, and of Fecundity in Thoroughbred Racehorses’, *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series A, Containing Papers of a Mathematical or Physical Character*, 192 (1899): 258.

fertility be shown to be differential enough to account for continuing population growth?¹⁰

Pearson and his collaborators believed the answer to these questions was that high fertility was a characteristic possessed by a coherent and identifiable group that shared other characteristics, none of which were socially desirable or beneficial. Indeed, this idea seemed intuitively plausible, given Booth and Rowntree's estimate that 30% of the country was living in poverty mapped on to Pearson's population model. There was a problem in relating the two sets of claims, though. While Booth and Rowntree had drawn on data about economic means and security to construct their hierarchical social classifications, they had made few claims about the relationship between their categories and underlying biological or psychological traits.¹¹ As he explained to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in October 1903, however, Pearson believed 'that underlying every psychical state there is a physical state', meaning social classes were strong, though not monolithic, expressions of intellectual capacity and potential – things that were notoriously difficult to measure.¹²

David Heron (1881-1969), who joined the Galton Laboratory for National Eugenics as a research fellow around 1906, was at the forefront of trying to overcome these issues.¹³ Like the rest of his colleagues in the Galton Laboratory, Heron operated under significant financial constraints that meant he was not able to employ vast

¹⁰ The declining birthrate and the debate about it has been the subject of numerous historical studies, the best of which are Soloway, *Demography and Degeneration* (Chapel Hill, 1995) and Simon Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender in Britain, 1860-1940* (Cambridge, 1996).

¹¹ Indeed, as Ross McKibbin argued, it was lack of such claims that distinguished Booth and Rowntree's methodology from alternative sociologies during the period. McKibbin, 'Class and Poverty in Edwardian England', in McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 167-96.

¹² Karl Pearson, 'On the Inheritance of the Mental and Moral Characters in Man, and its Comparison with the Inheritance of the Physical Characters', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 33 (1903): 193. For a useful overview of the emergence of 'intelligence' as a category see John Carson, 'The Culture of Intelligence', in Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross (eds), *The Cambridge History of Science: Volume 7, The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 635-48.

¹³ E. S. Pearson, 'David Heron, 1881-1969', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A*, 133 (1970): 287-91.

numbers of assistants and instruct them to knock on tens of thousands of doors or go undercover in the sweated trades, as Booth and Rowntree had. Instead, Heron had to devise a way of indirectly learning about the 25% of the population he and his colleagues thought were the most fertile members of society – a process that meant converting assumptions into working hypotheses.

Believing that ‘better’ people were overwhelmingly likely to live near ‘better’ people, Heron thought Pearson’s problems could be turned into spatial questions. Harvesting readily available information about a range of different issues, from the number of men employed in professional jobs per 1,000 occupied males, to the ratio of female domestic servants per 100 families, to the number of households where there were more than two people per room, each of which he expected to differ according to the kind of people who lived there, Heron created statistical profiles for each of London’s 27 districts. He then calculated each district’s ‘corrected’ birthrate, the number of children born to women of child-bearing age, which statisticians had started to prefer to the crude rate, primarily because the number of births per 1,000 people was easily distorted by increasing life expectancy.¹⁴

Heron believed the results were stark. There was a difference of more than 10 births per 100 married women aged 15 to 54 between areas such as Westminster (12.55), where life expectancy was high and large numbers of servants were employed, and Stepney (23.99), where there was overcrowding and large numbers of unskilled labourers, in 1901. ‘Where the labour is of the lowest type’, he argued, ‘where poverty

¹⁴ The definition of ‘child-bearing age’ changed from study to study but was constrained by the data collected, for example the age categories in the census. As a consequence, the window of fertility in some studies closed at 45, in others at 55.

leads to the pawnbroker and forces the child at the earliest possible age into employment, there the married women have the most offspring'.¹⁵

These results seemed to be confirmed by other researchers at UCL. Ethel Elderton, who joined the Eugenics Record Office in 1905, for example, followed Heron's approach and built statistical profiles of Lancashire, Cheshire, three districts of Yorkshire, Cumberland and Westmorland, Durham, and Northumberland in her widely influential *Report on the English Birthrate. Part I, England North of the Humber* (1914). Observing the same differential relationships between fertility and a range of different economic and social measures, Elderton argued that the differential birthrates were psychological and diffusive: caused by the spread of contraceptive knowledge and practices, which enabled people from all social classes to choose to separate sexual intercourse from reproduction.¹⁶ Nevertheless, she argued, the data clearly showed that healthy people were much more likely to produce healthy children, well educated people were much more likely to produce well educated children, and so on.

These conclusions, and the assumptions that shaped the approach that produced them, made sense in lots of ways in early twentieth-century Britain. Geography mattered: declining industries, located in particular regions, were a major cause of concern and liberal economists worried about labour immobility. Yet, regardless of how persuasive Pearson, Heron, Elderton, and their colleagues in the Galton Laboratory thought their statistical profiles were, others were not convinced. As T. H. C. Stevenson (1870-1932), superintendent of statistics at the Office of the Registrar General, explained in a paper to the Royal Statistical Society in 1928, an obvious limitation was

¹⁵ David Heron, *On the Relation of Fertility in Man to Social Status, and on the Changes in this Relation that have Taken Place During the Last Fifty Years* (London, 1906), p. 13.

¹⁶ Ethel Elderton, *Report on the English Birthrate. Part I, England North of the Humber* (London, 1914). For more on the debates about increased use of contraceptives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 45-65.

that, while even the richest areas had poor people living in them, the measures used to construct statistical profiles like Heron's seldom said much about the people they were then associated with. Family income and tenement size, for instance, passed on little information about the social standing of the occupiers. A clergyman, for example, was not well remunerated but he was very well educated and likely to live a healthier and longer life than many people paid similarly modest amounts in jobs that commanded less social respect. Indeed, a poor family of 10 often occupied the same number of rooms as a well-off bachelor.¹⁷

Stevenson believed there was a more reliable basis for social classification: occupation, which numerous social researchers, most notably Karl Marx, had previously identified as one of the most important symbols of the material determinants of class. Stevenson had been developing ideas about how to use occupation as the framework for social classification since 1910, when the Liberal government, under pressure from eugenicists to formulate some kind of response to concerns about the declining birthrate, had announced that a fertility questionnaire would be added to the following year's census, in part to deflect calls for eugenic legislation.¹⁸ Alongside the usual census questions, every household in Britain had been required to provide details of the age and sex of each resident, the length of any current marriages, the number of living and dead offspring those marriages had produced, and where those children had been born.

¹⁷ T. H. C. Stevenson, 'The Vital Statistics of Wealth and Poverty', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 91 (1928): pp. 207-12.

¹⁸ T. H. C. Stevenson, 'Meeting. December 11, 1914', *The Declining Birth-Rate: Its Causes and Effects. Being the Report of and Chief Evidence Taken by the National Birth-Rate Commission, Instituted, with Official Recognition, by the National Council of Public Morals—for The Promotion of Race Regeneration—Spiritual, Moral and Physical* (London, 1916), pp. 350-71. Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender in Britain*, p. 242.

The information generated by this exercise helped Stevenson to succeed in ordering occupations into a comprehensive hierarchical social classification – something that had defeated other statisticians, including William Farr, who had tried but failed to produce something similar.¹⁹ Starting with the existing census classification system for occupations, which featured trade- and profession-based orders and hierarchical sub-orders, Stevenson created a single linear series featuring five classes: upper and middle; intermediate; skilled workers; intermediate; and unskilled workers. Yet he was only able to do so – a process that took more than 15 years – thanks to a number of interrelated assumptions. One was that fertility rates not only varied between classes but declined the further one moved up the hierarchy. Another was that concepts such as ‘skill’ could be used to rank manual jobs. The most important, however, was that professional jobs were superior to manual ones, which has led Simon Szreter to call the end product the ‘professional model of social class’.²⁰

Nevertheless, even with these guiding assumptions, Stevenson struggled to make his model entirely consistent. Some occupations, such as agricultural labourer, for example, did not slot neatly into the place he thought they should go because their fertility rates were lower than he thought they should be. Indeed, for all its seeming comprehensiveness, Stevenson’s professional model was not based on direct observation of the individuals in question. Instead, it was, for the most part, a status model: a hierarchy that reflected what Stevenson believed was the esteem in which occupations should be held. Stevenson, however, was far from alone in believing that status – in particular the idea that professionalism is the highest form of status – was a

¹⁹ Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender*, pp. 77-82, ch. 3; William Farr, ‘The New Classification of the People According to their Employments’, in *Census for England and Wales for the Year 1861: General Report* (London, 1863), pp. 225-48.

²⁰ Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender*, chs 2-5; Stevenson, ‘The Vital Statistics of Wealth and Poverty’, pp. 213-6. *Fertility of Marriage Report* pt 2, p. cxx-I; Szreter, *Fertility, Class, and Gender*, pp. 74-5.

useful way out of the problems that dogged efforts to map social structure. Indeed, for an emerging generation of researchers, it was also a starting point for envisaging social structure in dynamic as well as static terms.

Professions and Education: Ladder or Greasy Pole?

After studying biology at Oxford and then under Pearson as a postgraduate in the Galton Laboratory during the first decade of the 1900s, Alexander Carr-Saunders (1886-1966) carved out a distinguished career for himself as one the early twentieth-century's most significant biosocial thinkers and, in his later years, an immensely important university administrator.²¹ Thanks to his training in biometrics, Carr-Saunders' early work, such as *The Population Problem* (1922), was statistically orientated. But, like Elderton before him, he was interested in drawing out the implications of particular customs and conventions, with human behaviour seen as manifesting itself in changes in the social structure, observed in statistical patterns, over time. Such was the interest in this programme that in 1923 he was appointed the first Charles Booth Professor of Social Science at the University of Liverpool.

A Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales (1927), the most important of the studies Carr-Saunders carried out after arriving at Liverpool, was written with his colleague David Caradog Jones, who had previously been employed as

²¹ Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, 'Populating Sociology: Carr-Saunders and the Problem of Population', *The Sociological Review* 56 (2008): 552-78. Chris Renwick, 'Eugenics, Population Research, and Social Mobility Studies in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* 59 (2016): 845-67; Renwick, 'Biology, Social Science, and Population in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Britain', in Maurizio Meloni, John Cromby, Des Fitzgerald, and Stephanie Lloyd (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Biology and Society* (Basingstoke, 2017), pp. 77-95. Given his importance, it is surprising that Carr-Saunders has never been the subject of extensive scholarly treatment.

a research assistant by both William Beveridge and R. H. Tawney. As Carr-Saunders and Jones explained in their introduction, they saw a ‘morphological’ approach to human organisation, using statistical data to describe its shape and form, with the aim of revealing the function of its various parts, as fundamental to making progress on the kinds of questions Pearson and his collaborators had started to grapple with twenty years earlier.²²

Drawing on census data, local government statistics, Royal Commission reports, labour statistics, and information drawn from a wide range of social science studies, to name just a handful of sources, Carr-Saunders and Jones produced 20 chapters outlining the contours of society in England and Wales, from the geographical and age distribution of their people, to its social insurance schemes, crime levels, and inequalities of wealth. They confessed they found it difficult to identify distinct classes, understood as things in which ‘the interest of the members... are identical, or nearly so, and opposed to the interests of the rest of the community’. Indeed, Carr-Saunders and Jones wondered whether the effort Stevenson had put into his social classification was really worth it, arguing that a simple income scale would suffice.²³

Carr-Saunders and Jones were not convinced, however, that social stratification reflected brute physical facts. Social institutions had an important part to play in allocating individuals to places in the social structure but, they argued, these mechanisms were frequently faulty or not working in the way people imagined them to.²⁴ The education system, for example, which had grown as the school leaving had been gradually raised to 14 since the Taunton Commission during the mid-1860s, was

²² Carr-Saunders and Jones, *Social Structure*, p. xiii.

²³ Carr-Saunders and Jones, *Social Structure*, ch. 6. The ‘wage-earning’ element of the employed class were the only group to come close to matching this description – a belief that showed the continued sway of discussions about things like the ‘social problem group’ at the bottom of society. John Welshman, *Underclass: A History of the Excluded Since 1880*, second edition (London, 2013), chs 3 & 4.

²⁴ Carr-Saunders and Jones, *Social Structure*, ch. 11.

considered by people of all kinds of political persuasions to be a way of identifying talent. Indeed, the likes of the economic historian and political theorist R. H. Tawney (1880-1962), who wrote *Secondary Education for All* (1922), the Labour Party's manifesto for universal education, had helped popularise the image of a 'ladder' as a metaphor for how the school system should work. This vision was closely related to an emergent and increasingly important analytic distinction, which had its roots in John Stuart Mill's work but had been discussed in much more depth by Tawney, between equality of opportunity – fairness in the processes through which individuals are selected to advance – and equality of outcome – the similarities, or differences, in the material conditions enjoyed by individuals.²⁵

Carr-Saunders and Jones agreed with Tawney's assessment that, as things stood, the education system was more 'greasy pole' than a ladder.²⁶ An education at an Oxbridge college or top public school was frequently considered better than one obtained elsewhere. But, Carr-Saunders and Jones argued, that attitude was based on the social status of those who went to such elite institutions rather any evidence relating to the intellectual value and content of what they were taught. The reality was that there was self-perpetuating cycle at the top of society.

²⁵ John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy* (London, 1848), II.I.7; R. H. Tawney, *Equality* (London, 1931), ch. 4. See also John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London, 1919), p. 9. My thanks to Chris Brooke for bringing the passage in Mill to my attention. As one of my anonymous reviewers helpfully pointed out, in addition to using the ladder metaphor, Tawney also deployed a 'highway' metaphor, in which barriers were lifted, allowing larger numbers of people to travel on an educational road – see Tawney, *Secondary Education for All: A Policy for Labour* (London, 1988), pp. 31-33. In this sense, Tawney, like many others who used the analytic distinction between equality of opportunity and outcome, understood the two to have a close relationship, whereby greater equality of outcome would be the result of greater equality of opportunity (and vice versa). For more on equality of opportunity, equality of outcome, and professionalism, see Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London, 1989), pp. xiii-iv. For a broader discussion of the place of these issues in progressive and leftwing politics during the period see Ben Jackson, *Equality and the British Left: A Study in Progressive Political Thought, 1900-64* (Manchester, 2007), especially chs 1 and 5.

²⁶ R. H. Tawney, *Secondary Education for All: A Policy for Labour* (London, 1988), p. 54. First published in 1922. Lawrence Goldman, *The Life of R. H. Tawney: Socialism and History* (London, 2013), ch. 8; Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement: Mental Testing and English Education, 1880-1940*, in collaboration with Stephen Sharp (Oxford, 1984), pp. 171-5.

Such an education carries prestige and facilitates entry into many lucrative lines of work. The children of the rich thus not only inherit their parents' wealth but are also placed in positions where they can earn relatively big incomes. The system is such that it is not difficult for the rich to maintain themselves generation after generation in comparative comfort.²⁷

'Choice of employment is limited by educational acquirements', Carr-Saunders and Jones explained,

and educational opportunities are limited by the financial position of the parents, except in so far as the educational ladder provides a way out. Most children, therefore, receive an education which enables them to enter the same grade of occupation as their parents.²⁸

It was in this context that Carr-Saunders was drawn to the professions as an object of study. Like many of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries,

²⁷ The intellectual content of such education was, of course, a major cause of concern for many social reformers during the late nineteenth century, especially those associated with the National Efficiency movement. For Fabian socialists such as Sidney and Beatrice Webb, public schools were guilty of eschewing science in favour of a curriculum dominated by the arts, humanities, and classics. This, they argued, was holding Britain back in a modern industrialised world – an argument that would return, of course, with C. P. Snow's *Two Cultures* half a century later.

²⁸ Carr-Saunders and Jones, *Social Structure*, p. 141. They supported these conclusions by drawing on two earlier studies. S. J. Chapman, an economist at the University of Manchester, had led work on recruiting practices and family employment histories in Lancashire, finding evidence of promotion through the ranks but, for the most part, rigidity, with young men tending to take up their father's trades. A. W. Ashby and J. Mogan-Jones, of University College, Aberystwyth, had collected data on the family history of Welsh farmers and found that, despite a reasonable amount of in and outflow, around three quarters of farmers were the sons of farmers, with a further 10% the offspring of farm labourers. S. J. Chapman and F. J. Marquis, 'The Recruiting of the Employing Classes from the Ranks of the Wage Earners in the Cotton Industry', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* (1912): 293-313; S. J. Chapman and W. Abbott, 'The Tendency of Children to Enter Their Father's Trade', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society* 76 (1913): 599-604; A. W. Ashby and J. Morgan-Jones, 'The Social Origins of Welsh Farmers', *The Welsh Journal of Agriculture* 2 (1926): 12-35.

including Pearson and Stevenson, Carr-Saunders believed professionalisation was a good thing – ‘one of the hopeful features of the time’, as he put it in his Herbert Spencer lecture at Oxford in 1928.²⁹ The reason was Carr-Saunders’ commitment to the idea that expertise was necessary to solve the vast majority of the highly complex social and economic problems that confronted both modern industrial societies and Britain in particular during the 1920s. He demonstrated this commitment by becoming involved in the planning movement during the early 1930s, which found a focus with the founding of Political and Economic Planning, one of the first think tanks in 1931.³⁰ According to Edward Max Nicholson, one of the leading figures in PEP, Britain’s problems since the end of the First World War were essentially a consequence of incompetence and inefficiency, caused by an amateurism among its elites and their naïve belief in *laissez faire* approaches to economic and social challenges.

The Professions, co-written with Paul Alexander Wilson, who had worked on a huge social survey of Merseyside led by David Caradog Jones, was part of Carr-Saunders’ effort to contribute to these discussions. As they explained, Carr-Saunders and Wilson believed an important starting point was being able to describe the professions, something they thought most social researchers were unable to do because, historically speaking, there had been much more interest in trade unions, which they thought ‘astonishing inasmuch as the greater skill and responsibility of professional men as compared with members of the trade unions render their associations far more interesting and important’.³¹ To that end, they described the structure and history of 27

²⁹ Alexander Carr-Saunders, *Professions: Their Organization and Place in Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928), p. 31.

³⁰ Daniel Ritschel, *The Politics of Planning: The Debate on Economic Planning in Britain in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1997); Richard Cockett, *Thinking the Unthinkable: Think Tanks and the Economic Counter Revolution, 1931-1983* (London, 1995), ch. 1; John Pinder (ed.), *Fifty Years of Political and Economic Planning: Looking Forward, 1931-1981* (London, 1981)

³¹ Carr-Saunders and P. A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford, 1933), p. iii. They suggested that Sidney and Beatrice Webb (also the authors of one of the most important and influential studies of trade unions) were the only figures to have published on the history of professions, albeit briefly. Carr-Saunders and P.

groups, from lawyers and accountants to masseurs and biophysical assistants, all with the aim of explaining those groups' entry requirements and the barriers that stood in hopeful applicants' way.

This descriptive knowledge was not their only goal, however. As Carr-Saunders and Wilson explained, they also wanted to understand more about the changes in the structure and functioning of society that were required to create a truly professional society and, of course, the extent to which Britain was on the right path. Reflecting on these issues, they argued that

hand in hand with specialized training goes the selection for training of those with suitable gifts, or as it is now called, vocational guidance. Opportunities for specialized training are being gradually extended to all, and we may therefore look forward to a system of careers open to trained and tested talent. This should be a factor making for social stability since it tends to reduce social injustice. Advancement to responsible positions would be more by reason of proved competence and experience than by luck, influence, and pushfulness; this should lead to greater efficiency.³²

This account of modern Britain – descriptive and normative in equal measure – was dynamic rather than static and reflected the ideology and ethics of early twentieth-century professionalism, which has been explored by Harold Perkin.³³ In a departure

A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford, 1933), p. 2; Beatrice Webb, 'English Teachers and their Professional Organisation', Chapters I & II, *The New Statesman*, Special Supplement, vol. 5, 25th September 1915; Beatrice Webb, 'English Teachers and their Professional Organisation', Chapters III & IV, *The New Statesman*, Special Supplement, vol. 5, 2nd October 1915; Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, 'Professional Associations', Chapters I-IV, *The New Statesman*, Special Supplement, vol. 9, 21st April 1917.

³² Carr-Saunders and Wilson, *The Professions*, p. 494.

³³ Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England Since 1880* (London, 1989)

from the nineteenth-century liberal capitalism, which venerated entrepreneurial individuals, the ideology of professionalism was built on the idea that there was a deep – and theoretically bottomless – pool of skill and ability in society and that this was a resource to be channelled into economic and social development. Individuals were supposed to be able to move in and out of social classes that expanded and contracted as necessary and appropriate. But such a vision prompted a number of questions that Carr-Saunders and Wilson were unable to answer in *The Professions*. To what extent was Britain already a society of this kind? Did people move in and out of social classes? Moreover, did these movements, or lack of them, have any relationship to the talent and ability that was available to Britain? The answer to these questions was sought by a number of Carr-Saunders' fellow-travellers in the social sciences.

Social Mobility: Drainage, Wastage, and Opportunity

When Carr-Saunders and Wilson first articulated these ideas about a dynamic but stratified society, few people used the term 'social mobility' to describe the phenomena of individuals moving between different classes. The first significant work to use the term in a sustained and focused way was the Russian-American sociologist Pitirim Sorokin's book, *Social Mobility* (1927), which, as one might expect from the first study of its kind, set out to introduce a conceptual framework and analytic tools. Sorokin described social space as multi-dimensional, with horizontal and vertical axes, and considered a wide range of positive and negative consequences for those who found themselves socially mobile, including the psychological costs that might follow from relocating to a different social context. Around the same time, however, social

researchers in Britain were carrying out smaller-scale projects that were rooted in the linear, professionally orientated outlook that had been developing since the late nineteenth century.

Morris Ginsberg (1889-1970), L. T. Hobhouse's sometimes maligned but more frequently forgotten successor as the Martin White Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, conducted one of the first of these studies. 'Interchange between Social Classes', published in *The Economic Journal* in 1929, was based on evidence Ginsberg had gathered from a range of sources, including: 4,000 questionnaires he had circulated among university teachers, school teachers, students, and civil servants; information he had managed to obtain on the backgrounds of people admitted to Lincoln's Inn; and data supplied by his LSE colleague Arthur Bowley. Utilising a class model that Ginsberg described as 'coincid[ing]' with Stevenson's, Ginsberg's aim was to compare the current generation's position with their parents' and grandparents', in order to understand whether classes perpetuated themselves over time or if there was movement between them.³⁴

Ginsberg's reason for undertaking such a study – one that seems incongruous, given his reputation as a philosophical sociologist – was his belief that few claims about social stratification were justifiable unless there really was a 'social ladder' that people could climb up and down.³⁵ His findings suggested that a ladder between classes did exist in modern Britain. There was 'evidence of upward mobility' from the wage-earning working class to the upper and middle classes, he wrote, and that 'this seems to be increasing as compared with the past generation'.³⁶ Yet, he observed, people seemed

³⁴ Morris Ginsberg, 'Interchange Between Social Classes', *The Economic Journal* (1929), p. 555.

³⁵ Ginsberg, 'Interchange Between Social Classes', p. 555. Indeed, Ginsberg's historical standing is illustrated by the dearth of historical or sociological work on his life and work since his death in 1970. The best source for information about Ginsberg's professional life is Ralf Dahrendorf, *A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science* (Oxford, 1995).

³⁶ Ginsberg, 'Interchange Between Social Classes', p. 562.

to climb the ladder much more often they descended down it – a fact that suggested a number of important implications. One was that failure among the middle and upper classes did not seem to be punished by decline. Another was that, as a consequence, only a relatively small number of those capable of climbing the ladder were actually able to do so because there was little space for them at the top. Nevertheless, what also appeared to be true was that ‘there seems thus little ground for the hypothesis of “drainage” and no indication that the reserves of ability in the lower classes are being depleted’.³⁷

Other studies followed Ginsberg’s. At the University of Liverpool, for example, C. T. Saunders drew on a huge survey of Merseyside, led by David Caradog Jones, to explore the mobility of working class individuals, finding much less mobility, either up or down, than Ginsberg had.³⁸ The most influential group of researchers of these topics, however, was based close to Ginsberg and Tawney, in the LSE’s short-lived department of social biology. The brainchild of William Beveridge, the LSE’s director for most of the interwar period, the department of social biology integrated a number of strands from early twentieth-century biosocial research, including the belief that intelligence could be measured, social structure described accurately, and social science used for progressive political purposes rooted in a professional view of society.³⁹ Indeed, Beveridge had signalled his ambitions for the department by appointing Lancelot Hogben, a leading geneticist and socialist critic of ‘mainline’ eugenics, the idea that hard heredity determined social outcomes, as chair of social biology and allowing him to recruit both biologists – primarily graduate students who assisted with his laboratory

³⁷ Ginsberg, ‘Interchange Between Social Classes’, p. 562.

³⁸ C. T. Saunders, ‘A Study of Occupational Mobility’, *The Economic Journal* 41 (1931): 227-40.

³⁹ Chris Renwick, ‘Completing the Circle of Social Sciences? William Beveridge and Social Biology at London School of Economics During the 1930s’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 44 (2014): 478-96.

based research – and statisticians, including Enid Charles, the radical feminist demographer.⁴⁰

Unsurprisingly, education was a major focus for the department of social biology's work, with researchers such as Pearl Gray and J. L. Moshinsky using intelligence tests to acquire data on more than 10,000 school children in London.⁴¹ The spur for this approach was the work carried out by Cyril Burt, a biometrician, eugenicist, and psychologist for London County Council before his appointment as Professor of Psychology at UCL in 1932. Burt had made extensive use of his colleague Charles Spearman's work in an effort to measure what he believed was the innate intelligence of children and their fathers. Although he believed in the existence of a self-perpetuating underclass – something underscored by his role as chair of the Eugenics Society's Pauper Pedigree Project during the 1930s – and that social stratification was justified by the variation of biological differences, he also believed the existing class structure failed to reflect the distribution of intelligence through society and that further educational reform was required. These conclusions had important practical implications during the middle decades of the twentieth century, when the school system was restructured around grammars and secondary moderns, with resources allocated to those deemed to have the greatest potential to benefit from them.⁴²

⁴⁰ On 'mainline' vs 'reform' eugenics see Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*, ch. 11; Diane B. Paul, *Controlling Human Heredity: 1865 to the Present* (New York, 1998), pp. 117-20; G. R. Searle, *Eugenics and Politics in Britain, 1900-14* (Leyden, 1976), chs 2, 4, 5, and 7. Charles was also Hogben's wife.

⁴¹ Chris Renwick, 'Eugenics, Population Research, and Social Mobility Studies in Early and Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain', *The Historical Journal* 59 (2016): 7-8.

⁴² For more on Burt see: L. S. Hearnshaw, *Cyril Burt: Psychologist* (London, 1979); Adrian Wooldridge, *Measuring the Mind: Education and Psychology in England, c.1860-c.1990* (Cambridge, 2006), *passim* but especially chs 4 and 13; Gillian Sutherland, *Ability, Merit and Measurement: Mental Testing and English Education, 1880-1940*, in collaboration with Stephen Sharp (Oxford, 1984); Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (New York, 1995), chs 4, 9, and 10; Welshman, *Underclass*, ch. 3; E. J. Lidbetter, *Heredity and the Social Problem Group* (London, 1933) For an overview of the emergence of the concept of general intelligence see John Carson, 'The Culture of Intelligence', in Theodore M. Porter and Dorothy Ross (eds), *The Cambridge History of Science: Vol. 7, the Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 635-48. On developments in education see Peter Mandler, 'Educating the Nation III: Social Mobility', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 26

The place of the department of social biology's work on education was summed up by the title of the sole collection of its work, *Political Arithmetic*, which was published in 1938, after the department had closed. Edited by Hogben, who also contributed a lengthy introduction, *Political Arithmetic* was presented as following in a tradition founded by William Petty, the seventeenth-century administrator and demographer who emphasised the importance of data collection and analysis for sound political decision making. Featuring seven chapters on differential fertility and population trends, dating back to the 1660s, the book also included five chapters, organised into a section entitled 'The Recruitment of Social Personnel', focused on education, including university admissions, and social and economic opportunity.

Utilising an occupational model based on the distinction between professional and non-professional jobs and gradations based on skill, the department's researchers tried to put their intelligence testing results into a dynamic context, showing the relationship between parental occupation and the social status of their offspring. In so doing, they developed further the trend of thinking about the problems that Britain faced as being essentially matters of efficient human resource allocation. Drawing attention to how a very high proportion of children born into the professional classes and deemed capable of benefitting from higher education enrolled at a university but, conversely, how a very low number of children of similar ability born to parents in manual occupations also did so, the department aimed to demonstrate that there was plenty of talent and ability available across the country but that it was not being mobilised.⁴³

(2016): pp. 7-10. See also Carol Dyhouse, 'Family Patterns of Social Mobility through Higher Education in England in the 1930s', *Journal of Social History* 34 (2000-1): 817-41.

⁴³ See in particular: Gray, J. L., and Pearl Moshinsky, 'Ability and Opportunity in English Education', in Lancelot Hogben (ed.), *Political Arithmetic: A Symposium of Population Studies* (London, 1938), pp. 337-76; Gray and Moshinsky, 'Ability and Opportunity in Relation to Parental Occupation,' in Lancelot Hogben (ed.), *Political Arithmetic: A Symposium of Population Studies* (London, 1938), pp. 377-417; David Glass and J. L. Gray, 'Opportunity and the Older Universities', in Lancelot Hogben (ed.), *Political Arithmetic: A Symposium of Population Studies* (London, 1938), pp. 418-70. Although, according to John Goldthorpe, while the department of social biology's research was an exemplar for empirical data

Hogben described this situation as ‘wastage’ – both biological and social – because institutions, most notably educational ones, did not develop the raw ability that had been identified among the working classes to its full potential.⁴⁴

Among the many researchers working on the projects included in *Political Arithmetic* was one young social scientist who would go on to be a hugely influential figure in British social science and social mobility studies after the Second World War. David Glass (1911-78), who had previously been a research assistant to both Beveridge and Arthur Bowley, was the son of a Jewish tailor from the East End of London who had studied geography as an undergraduate at LSE and began his career with *The Town* – a book saturated in radical socialist politics – in which he argued that reorganisation of urban space was necessary for social progress, not least to tackle the declining birthrate.⁴⁵ After the Second World War, however, Glass went down a different path, making his name with the multi-researcher project that resulted in *Social Mobility in Britain* (1954) – the country’s first large-scale study of the subject, carried out with help from the Government Social Survey – the Family Census, which he got the opportunity to lead via his involvement with the Royal Commission on Population, and also the first of the birth cohort studies that continue to this day.⁴⁶

Glass was not the only connection between post-war social mobility studies and early-twentieth-century work on social structure. Carr-Saunders succeeded Beveridge as

collection it was not so for statistical analysis of that data. John Goldthorpe, ‘Sociology and Statistics in Britain: The Strange History of Social Mobility Research and its Latter-Day Consequences’, Unpublished Manuscript (2016).

⁴⁴ Lancelot Hogben, ‘Introduction’, in Hogben (ed.), *Political Arithmetic: A Symposium of Population Studies* (London, 1938), pp. 331-33.

⁴⁵ David Glass, *The Town and Changing Civilisation* (London, 1935)

⁴⁶ David Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain* (London, 1954); David Glass and E. Grebnik, *The Trend and Pattern of Fertility in Great Britain: A Report on the Family Census of 1946*, 2 vols (London, 1954); Joint Committee of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and the Population Investigation Committee, *Maternity in Great Britain* (London, 1948). For a popular but well-informed and incisive history of the birth cohort surveys see Helen Pearson, *The Life Project: The Extraordinary Story of Our Ordinary Lives* (London, 2016).

director of the LSE in 1937, going on to appoint Glass as the Martin White Professor of Sociology, the oldest and most prestigious chair in British sociology, and even recruiting David Caradog Jones, who was almost 70 years old and on the verge of retirement, to work on the occupational class model that was the basis of Glass' team's social mobility analysis.⁴⁷ But, as Glass explained in his introduction to *Social Mobility in Britain*, while these researchers shared institutions and methods, it was their normative goals that were perhaps most important: establishing the case for greater fluidity between classes as the starting point for a better and more just society.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The increasing focus on the movement – actual and potential – of individuals through social space emerged thanks to an entanglement of politics and method in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. Methods were constrained by material factors, including finance, which prevented the biometricians, among others, from repeating the kinds of door-to-door surveys that had been carried out during the last two decades of the 1800s. But reforming politics were equally important. Where turn of the century researchers had been concerned primarily with the poor, particularly the idea that the source of Britain's problems was a sub-group reproducing faster than anyone else, their successors had turned the issue on its head. During the interwar years, an emerging strand of research saw the working classes conceptualised as an underutilised human

⁴⁷ John Hall and David Caradog Jones, 'The Social Grading of Occupations', *British Journal of Sociology* 1 (1950): 31-55. See Jones, 'Power: A Gift to Ordinary People' (autobiography), Special Collections and Archives, University of Liverpool, D48/1 iii-iv, ch. 20 for his account of how he came to work on the project at LSE.

⁴⁸ See Goldthorpe, 'Sociology and Statistics in Britain', for an enlightening discussion of the differences between social class and social status hierarchies and their importance for social mobility research.

resource and the lower and middle classes an engine of social change. The result was a social scientific manifesto for reform that reflected the identity of those who created it.

These developments matter for a variety of reasons that help us understand the continuities and discontinuities in the history of social mobility in Britain. While they show us that the form of social mobility research that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century is embedded in a particular epistemology, which is closely related to a specific politics that was conditioned by a particular set of historical events, they also show us how different approaches were constructed in the spaces that went unilluminated by those researchers' questions. Indeed, just as we have observed social investigators during the 1920s and 30s questioning their predecessors assumptions about the frequency of movement between social classes, we could note that social mobility researchers of the third quarter of the twentieth century went on to develop their work in different directions. For Glass, John Goldthorpe, and others who helped make social mobility research an emblem of progressive social science during the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, individual mobility was important as a sign of social justice. However, they did not want to completely disentangle mobility from questions about equality, with success in one area increasingly seen as related to success in the other. As Glass put it in *Social Mobility in Britain*, when making the case for comprehensive schools over grammars and secondary moderns, 'we must not "take the world as we find it" and ground our educational system in the existing social structure. In the schools, as in the wider society of which they are a part, we must deliberately make that closer community; it will not create itself'.⁴⁹

Of course, this mid-twentieth-century social mobility research provided an important part of the context for the efforts to reconceptualise class and social space that

⁴⁹ Glass, 'Introduction', in Glass (ed.), *Social Mobility in Britain* (London, 1954), p. 28.

we will be familiar with from the past decade. The ‘Great British Class Survey’, which was hosted on the BBC website and run by a team led by Mike Savage and Fiona Devine, attracted huge amounts of attention, especially among middle-class participants who were fascinated by the idea of finding out which social groupings they belonged to. Utilising this data, Savage, the current Martin White Professor of Sociology at LSE, and his collaborators endeavoured to integrate the ways Glass, Goldthorpe, and others had divided up the population and the theoretical tools that sociologists and historians have embraced since then – most notably the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.⁵⁰ In so doing, and perhaps ironically, their new model revived some of the earliest thinking on the subject, most notably Sorokin’s multi-dimensional social space.⁵¹ Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that, at the same time, inequality has also been the subject of renewed interest, not least from Savage, especially since Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* captured an audience well beyond his disciplinary home of economics.⁵²

Current concerns about the flaws with different ways of measuring and understanding class and social mobility therefore have a long and complex history. As we have seen, each way of investigating these subjects involves hugely consequential decisions about what factors to privilege over others, with the early investigators understanding only too well that social space and movement through it are multi-dimensional. The general point to derive from this observation is, of course, that different ways of thinking about social mobility have been available in the past, making

⁵⁰ Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, et al, ‘A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the Great British Class Survey Experiment’, *Sociology* 47 (2013): 219-50; Mike Savage et al, *Social Class in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2015). Bourdieu’s most famous and influential work on these subjects is *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, his study of the cultural tastes of different groups in 1960s France, which was first published in French in 1979 and English in 1984.

⁵¹ Sorokin, *Social Mobility* (London: 1927), especially ch. 21.

⁵² Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: 2015); Savage, ‘Piketty’s Challenge for Sociology’, *British Journal of Sociology* 65 (2014): 591-606.

our own efforts to reconstruct the concept and its history a continuation of a longer history of thinking about class and society. The more specific point, however, is that when it comes to the purpose of that project we have to consider the ways in which our methods of studying a topic like social mobility are inseparable from the politics that shape it.

Acknowledgements

I must offer my thanks to the editors of this special issue and the anonymous referees whose thoughts improved this paper significantly. I also wish to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, whose financial assistance (grant number AH/L007312/1) made the research for this article possible.