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Social Mobility and Class Identity: The Role of Economic Conditions in 33 Societies, 1999–2009

Josh Curtis*

Department of Sociology, University of Western Ontario, London, ON, Canada N6A 5C2

*Corresponding author. Email: josh.curtis@uwo.ca

Abstract

Using hierarchal linear models fitted to survey data from the 1999 and 2009 International Social Survey Program Social Inequality module, this article examines how social mobility shapes class identification in 33 societies. My concern is with how social mobility—both at the individual level and the country level—affects class identification. The findings demonstrate that both one's own social class and their class origin influence class identification. On the other hand, national-level absolute mobility does not meaningfully shape class identification. This finding implies that people either consider only their own economic conditions—i.e. they care little about the conditions in which others live—or they are unaware of actual levels of mobility within their country. Finally, I build on previous research by demonstrating the importance of national-level income inequality. As income inequality rises, middle-class identities become weaker—regardless of one's social class position—because the adverse effects of inequality are felt more acutely across the class structure.

Introduction

A long-standing argument holds that social mobility weakens class awareness (Marx, 1894; Sorokin, 1927, 1959; Lipset and Bendix, 1959; Goldthorpe, 1980). It is argued that mobility increases contact between social classes, which results in the depoliticization of economic issues, and reduces the potential for groups to achieve a 'class for itself' (Heath, 1981). For example, Sorokin (1927: p. 539) argues that mobile societies promote processes of 'delocalization', and 'atomization', because traditional class structures are less obvious, and the middle class is more fluid (see also Clement and Myles, 1994). In short, higher rates of class movement are thought to weaken economic discontent and class struggle, even among those who are not mobile themselves.

Nevertheless, although much early work on mobility alluded to its consequences for class identity, little empirical research has explored this relationship. The classical argument above, suggests that if class movement is common, social class may lose its political significance as class structures become less distinct (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1969; Goldthorpe, 1980; Heath, 1981). Theories of individualism and modernization take this argument to its most extreme, suggesting that social class is now of little importance to politics in modern society (see Inglehart, 1987; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Various reasons are offered for this alleged development—the occupational structure has become too complex, the working class is now more affluent, and other social identities have become more important—all of which rest on the assumption that people no longer hold meaningful class identities (Clarke and Lipset, 1991; Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Although difficult to deny that some behaviours—e.g. voting—have become

less influenced by social class over the past few decades (De Graff and Neiuwbeerta, 1995; Andersen and Heath, 2003; Andersen, Yang and Heath, 2006), it is also clear that class still remains an important influence on a wide array of other social and political attitudes (Brooks and Manza, 1997; Svallfors, 1997; Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Hout, 2008).

Aside from a few recent studies (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2013), little research has been done pertaining to the influence of national context on class identification. This research article begins to fill this gap by exploring the social and political implications of class identification and awareness across 33 modern societies. Using the 1999 and 2009 waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), combined with national-level economic data, this article explores how individual-level mobility and national-level economic conditions shape class identification in 33 countries. This is the first study to systematically explore the effect of both respondent's occupational class and their class origin[1] on class identification. I also build on previous work by exploring how national economic conditions affect class identity. To test the classical conjecture above, I explore the extent to which absolute mobility, in conjunction with economic development and income inequality, influences class identification. Finally, I systematically assess the cross-level relationships between social class and national conditions in their effect on class identification.

I find that both respondent's and father's social class position strongly influence how people perceive their fit in the class structure. Yet, while there is a lingering influence of class origin, it affects people in all class positions equally—i.e. class socialization is equally strong for all social classes. In terms of national context, I also draw several important new conclusions. I demonstrate that national-level absolute mobility does not influence class identification. This finding contradicts the notion that increasingly mobile societies are less class-aware than more traditional ones. While it is clear that the class structure has evolved, people remain strongly influenced by their own economic positions. In short, wider societal-level changes to the class structure may be far less detrimental for politics and class identification than previously theorized. Finally, consistent with other research (Andersen and Curtis, 2012), I also confirm the importance of income inequality in shaping class identification and awareness. This new evidence suggests that class identities are more pronounced when inequality is *low* rather than when it is *high* (see Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2013). I argue that this is because when income inequality is high, its adverse effects are

felt across the class structure, and thus, fewer people identify with the middle and upper classes, regardless of their class position.

Class Identification: Its Origins and Development

Research on class identification and awareness has waned in popularity since the influential work of Cantril (1943), Centers (1949), and other important early figures (c.f., Hodge and Trieman, 1968; Jackman and Jackman, 1983). This research was foundational, as it established that processes of class identification were strongly connected to individuals' economic class (Centers 1949; Jackman and Jackman, 1983), occupation and social prestige (Kornhauser, 1938), and social network affiliation (Hodge and Treiman, 1968). In other words, occupational social class and economic position was shown to strongly affect how people perceived class placement.

These results do not imply that people are always correct in their interpretations, however. In fact, class awareness is low in many modern societies (Andersen and Curtis, 2012). Some argue that 'middle-class identity' bias has become highly prevalent (Evans and Kelley, 2004). This theory argues that people identify with the middle class, regardless of their own economic position. Also consistent with this argument is Goldthorpe *et al.*'s (1969) affluent worker hypothesis and Inglehart's (1987) post-materialist thesis, which suggest that societal affluence has altered the way people think about social class and class identification. In this regard, people's class identities are less tied to the means of production as the class structure becomes differentiated. Also similar is the hypothesis that people are increasingly influenced by consumption rather than production relations (Clement and Myles, 1994). If true, what it means to be 'middle class' is tied more directly to spending than to labour.

Recently, several studies have explored how national-level conditions affect class identity (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Andersen and Curtis, 2012). These studies find distinct cross-national differences in class identity stemming from economic factors. For some, the cause of differentiation is economic development. According to Evans and Kelley (2004), richer societies identify more strongly as 'middle' and 'upper' class, relative to poorer ones. For others, however, the story is about income inequality (Andersen and Curtis, 2012). The advantages of economic growth are never distributed equally across society, and inequality has increased alongside economic prosperity within many advanced nations (Atkinson and

Piketty, 2007). In other words, economic growth may lead to higher expectations of consumption among the lower and working classes that they are unable to achieve. Accordingly, Andersen and Curtis (2012) note that as inequality grows, the rich are more likely to identify with the upper classes, and the poor are more likely to identify with the lower and working class. The argument here is that social and economic differences are more obvious in these societies, as inequality and social status differences become more noticeable (Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2013). As a result, class identities are stronger in less-equal societies. Importantly, however, these findings were based on using income as a measure of individual-level economic conditions. As yet, the roles of occupational class and social mobility have yet to be explored.

Relative Mobility versus Absolute Mobility

There are two main theoretical components that pertain to intergenerational mobility: 'relative' and 'absolute' mobility. Relative mobility (or social fluidity) refers to equality of opportunity. Higher rates of relative mobility imply that structural constraints in society are low, increasing the potential for class movement. In other words, the more relative mobility in society, the more equal its members are in their ability to advance in the socio-economic hierarchy. In essence, it is a measure of 'openness' and the degree to which attaining an occupational position is influenced by social origin (Breen and Jonsson, 2007). As Goldthorpe (2013) summarizes, relative measures '*compare the chances* of individuals of differing class origins arriving at different class destinations' (2013: p. 432) and thus indicate the extent of social fluidity, or equality of opportunity, in a given society.

On the other hand, absolute mobility (or structural mobility) involves shifts in the economy that affect the class movement of people from all class backgrounds. It does not account for an individual's chances of reaching a particular class, but rather for macro societal-level changes. It is a type of forced vertical mobility that results from changes in the occupational structure (Hout, 1988; Beller, 2009), and captures shifts in the distribution of class origins and class destinations. In sum, absolute mobility results from societal-level factors, rather than the efforts of individuals themselves, and refers to the actual proportion of people who are mobile—either downward *or* upward.

According to classical theories (Marx, 1894; Sorokin, 1927, 1959), higher rates of absolute mobility weaken discontent and class struggle. Modern theories take a similar approach—i.e. the 'Death of Class' (Clark and Lipset, 1991) and the 'postmaterialist thesis' (Inglehart, 1987)—arguing that industrialization, rising educational attainment, and evolving class structures have diminished the influence of class. Both classic and modern theories suggest that macro-level changes to class structures alter the nature of class politics, and weaken class awareness. This allegedly occurs because mobility increases contact between classes, thereby depoliticizing economic concerns. To test these theories, this article uses a measure of absolute mobility to understand how changes in national occupational structures have evolved, which might affect class identification and awareness.

Social Mobility, Public Opinion, and Class Identity

Lipset and Zetterberg's (1959) classic work observed that mobility rates were much the same across all industrialized societies. They argued that while changes to mobility were inevitable, they were simply 'trendless fluctuations'. Recent work supports this classic argument as well (see, for example, Lipset and Zetterberg, 1959; Featherman, Jones and Hauser, 1975; Tyree, Semyonov and Hodge, 1979; Grusky and Hauser, 1984; Ganzeboom, Luijkx and Treiman, 1989; Treiman and Yip, 1989; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Breen, 2004). For example, in *The Constant Flux*, Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992) rejected the liberal hypothesis that mobility was driven by industrialization or modernization. Instead, they argued that variations in mobility could be accounted for by national peculiarities rather than systematic differences.

Yet, some research casts doubt on this premise, arguing that industrialization plays a role for mobility (Hauser and Featherman, 1977; Erikson *et al.*, 1979; Hope, 1981; Grusky and Hauser, 1984; Gerber and Hout, 2004; Breen and Jonsson, 2007; Breen, 2010). This work finds that mobility is greatest in societies where the opportunity structure is open, and when barriers and advantages associated with peoples' backgrounds are few (Hout and Hauser, 1992; Beller and Hout, 2006).

Others argue that economic factors affect mobility (Featherman, Jones and Hauser, 1975; Hauser and Featherman, 1977; Erikson *et al.*, 1979, 1982; Hope, 1981; Grusky and Hauser, 1984; Gerber and Hout, 2004). While explanations tend to be mixed, they often rest on the notion that there is a positive relationship between mobility and educational expansion (Grusky and Hauser, 1984; Breen and Jonsson, 2007; Breen, 2010),

income inequality (Tyree, Semyonov and Hodge, 1979), and economic development (Lipset and Zetterberg, 1959; Treiman, 1970; Treiman and Yip, 1989; Yaish and Andersen, 2012). The possible relationships between mobility, economic development, and inequality suggest the importance of assessing them simultaneously when examining class identity.

Although there is a limited amount of research on this topic, what has been done provides some insight. For example, Savage (2005) suggests that class remains an important and meaningful identity marker throughout different stages of people's lives. He argues that people are reflexive and individualized, as they account for their mobility. In other words, people are class-aware, and their class identities typically match their new economic positions. Similarly, Ablemann (1997; see also Andersen and Yaish, 2012) demonstrates a lingering influence of class origin on class attitudes. He shows the dynamic nature of class identification throughout the life course as Korean women struggle to mediate between their past and present perceptions of class. In other words, mobility may lead to a lack of class awareness if early class socialization has a lingering influence on attitude formation later in life.

While research on the relationship between mobility and class identity is scarce, mobility has been found to affect related political and economic attitudes (De Graaf and Nieuwbeerta, 1995). It is possible that attitudes towards class identity are influenced in much the same way. For some, political attitudes are influenced by early family life and class socialization (De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta and Heath, 1995; Kelley and Evans, 1995). For example, Andersen and Yaish (2012) demonstrate that relative to those who are not socially mobile, the upwardly mobile are more left leaning, and less supportive of income inequality (see also De Graaf, Nieuwbeerta and Heath, 1995). This research finds that early class socialization influences attitudes later in life among those who are socially mobile. It follows, then, that mobile individuals may lack class awareness as well.

Yet, other evidence suggests that personal experience later in life can encourage people to react against their values learned as children. For example, Lipset's (1960) *Political Man* demonstrates that the majority of upwardly mobile individuals tend to vote for non-working class parties. Following similar arguments, Kelley and Kelley (2009) demonstrate that mobility is linked to support for income inequality. Relatedly, Alesina and La Ferrara (2005) argue that those who experience upward mobility tend to be less supportive of redistribution and

social policy. These arguments imply a functionalist logic, suggesting that mobility could be associated with an ideology of meritocracy (Davis and Moore, 1945). In sum, it is also possible that experiencing mobility results in even greater class awareness because people recognize their economic and status gains.

Other arguments suggest that mobility at the national level plays an important role. It is possible that when class movement is common, perceptions of class structures are less coherent. If movement between classes is common, political and economic values may not be effectively passed through successive generations. As a result, in more socially mobile societies, people may attribute less political meaning to the classes they belong to. This idea forms the foundation of Marx's (1894) argument that when classes become less self-recruiting, they lack the necessary foundations to achieve a 'class for itself'. The early work of Sorokin (1927) draws a similar conclusion. For Sorokin, mobility creates greater individualism and status rejection. This is because contact with different classes concomitantly exposes people to new values and ideologies, which may reduce the salience of class politics.

Research Questions

The present research is driven by hypotheses regarding class processes at both the individual and national levels. In terms of the individual-level hypotheses, I focus on the role of occupational class origin and destination:

Hypothesis 1: A respondent's social class position will strongly influence class identification. Specifically, those higher in the class structure will be more likely to identify with the middle and upper classes.
Hypothesis 2: Through processes of socialization, there will be a lingering influence of class origin on class identification later in life.

I also offer two competing hypotheses regarding individual-level mobility:

Hypothesis 2a: People who are upwardly mobile will be less likely to identify with the middle and upper classes. That is, they will be strongly influenced by the class origin despite experiencing occupational mobility.
Hypothesis 2b: People who are upwardly mobile will be more likely to identify with the middle and upper classes. In other words, people will react against their class of origin, and be even more likely than others to identify with their current class position.

In terms of contextual effects, I test the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Following classical arguments, in societies with greater absolute mobility, people will be increasingly likely to identify with a social class that does not match their occupational status.

Finally, I also explore how the relationship between social class and class identity will be moderated by national-level economic conditions. In doing so, I test for an interaction between social class and each of the three contextual variables above: *economic development, income inequality, and absolute mobility.*

Data and Methods

The individual-level survey data come from the ISSP Social Inequality module. This module consists of four surveys from 1987, 1992, 1999, and 2009. This study focuses on data collected for the two most recent periods (1999 and 2009). The ISSP was designed for the purpose of multinational comparative research and has been frequently used in studies concerned with comparative inequality (Kelley and Evans 1995; Osberg and Smeeding, 2006) and social mobility (Beller and Hout, 2006; Beller, 2009). The analysis includes respondents from all countries for which data were available across both survey periods. In total, I use data from 33 societies across 43 country-level contexts, given that several countries were surveyed twice (see Table 1). The sample is limited to individuals between the ages of 30 and 65 years on the grounds that they are more likely to be integrated into the class structure. After removing respondents with missing information, the analytic sample contains 33,481 individuals.

National-level data were extracted from various official sources. A measure of income inequality was derived using the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt, 2009). Economic development was tapped using the OECD and the World Bank archives. Finally, I constructed a measure of absolute mobility using the individual-level survey data.

Dependent Variable

I use a dichotomous variable that taps class identification as 'Working/Lower' class (coded 0) versus 'Middle/Upper' class (coded 1). This variable has been recoded from the following survey question: '*Most people see themselves as belonging to a particular class. Please tell me which social class you would say you belong to?*' Response categories include: (i) lower class, (ii) working

class, (iii) lower middle class, (iv) middle class, (v) upper middle class, and (vi) upper class. Collapsing the variable into two categories was necessary because of sparse cell counts. Few people identify as 'lower' and 'upper' class in nearly every society.[2] The hierarchical linear models that were used were complex, making it impossible to get convergence when the six-category variable was used.

Individual-level Variables

The ISSP data contain information on the occupation of both respondents and their fathers. Following Hout, Brooks and Manza (1995), classes were recoded in the following four categories: (i) 'professionals', (ii) 'managers', (iii) 'routine non-manual', and (iv) 'working' class. Each of the statistical models control for age,[3] gender, and education. Education was coded into three categories: 'Primary or less' (reference category), 'Secondary', and 'University'.

National-level Variables

Economic development

Economic development is measured by *GDP* per capita, standardized to 2009 US dollars for each survey year. These data were primarily obtained from the OECD (www.oecd.org) statistical database. In some instances, information was not available for specific countries in this analysis. When this occurred, I extracted data from *The World Bank* (www.worldbank.org), also considered to be a highly reliable source for data on national economies.

Absolute mobility

A measure for absolute mobility was constructed using the ISSP individual-level data. Following other sociological research on mobility (Gerber and Hout, 2004; Beller, 2009), the total number of individuals was divided by the frequencies of each cell in the off diagonal in the mobility tables that display the cross tabulations of respondent's/father's class for each country and survey. This measure ranges from 0 (no class movement) to 1 (complete class movement). In the observed data, this variable ranges from 0.590 in South Korea to 0.779 in Finland.

Income inequality

Following common practice, income inequality was measured using the *Gini* coefficient for equivilized household incomes, which ranges from 0 (total income equality) to 1 (total income inequality). Gini measures

were obtained from the OECD (http://www.oecd.org). However, missing countries were again encountered. Data for Chile, Estonia, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia were obtained from the Standardized World Income Inequality Database (Solt, 2009).[4] Descriptive statistics by country are shown in Table 1.

Statistical Models

The main analysis uses a series of binomial HLM models that predict 'Middle/Upper'-class identification. My first set of hypotheses evaluates the influence of social class on class identification. Model 1 begins by exploring the importance of one's current class position (Hypothesis 1) as well as class origin (Hypothesis 2) for class identification. This model also controls for national-level economic conditions: economic development, income inequality, and absolute mobility. Model 1b[5] explores the possibility that social mobility at the individual level influences how people perceive their position in the class structure (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). Model 2 builds on the previous models by including a random component for class, which allows social class to have a different effect across various contexts. This model tests whether class matters differently according to national conditions. Both models include a random component for the intercept and for the survey year. Models 1 and 2 also examine the importance of absolute mobility (Hypothesis 3) while controlling for economic development and income inequality. In other words, these models evaluate the importance of economic conditions for class identification.

Results from these models suggest that social class influences class identity and that class matters differently according to national context. To parse out this relationship, a range of models are tested to explore the relationship between social class, national economic conditions, and class identification (see Table A1). Model 3—the final model—shows how class interacts with income inequality to affect class identity. To display the non-significance of competing national-level conditions, I display results from one additional model. Model 4 tests whether social class and class identity are moderated by economic development and absolute mobility.

Results

I start by graphically exploring the bivariate relationship between class identity and national context. These figures represent only descriptive patterns. Figure 1 displays average class identity scores for each country according to economic development, income inequality,

and absolute mobility. The class identity average represents the mean score for each of the five class categories, with '1' representing the lowest and '5' representing the highest class. Consistent with previous research, panel (a) and panel (b) show that economic context shapes class identity. Panel (a) displays a positive relationship with economic development and class identification, suggesting that more prosperous economies raise people's middle- and upper-class identities. Panel (b), concerning income inequality, indicates that less-equal countries tend towards lower-class identification. Panel (c) offers new evidence, indicating a positive relationship between absolute mobility and class identity. As movement between classes becomes more common, people are more likely to hold middle- and upper-class identities, compared with those in societies with more ridged class structures.

I now turn to the HLM models, which control for contextual factors. The coefficients from these models are presented in Table 2. The first column displays Model 1, which confirms Hypothesis 1, demonstrating that social class strongly shapes class identification. Not surprisingly, 'professionals', 'managers', and 'routine non-manual' workers identify more strongly as 'Middle/Upper' class compared with the 'working' class. Also important, the variance of the intercept is statistically significant. Model 1 also includes a measure for class origin. As expected from Hypothesis 2, class origin also strongly influences class identity. This holds true for all class positions, implying a lingering effect of class origin later in life.[6] This begs the question of whether experiencing mobility affects class identification differently across the class structure. To test this hypothesis, I explore the interactive effect between respondent's and father's class to further assess its importance.

Interestingly, the interaction between individual class and class origin is not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 11.709$, $df = 9$, $P = 0.230$).[7] In other words, there is a lingering effect of class background on attitudes that operate *the same* for all individuals, irrespective of their class position (thus contradicting Hypotheses 2a and 2b). This is an interesting finding, given that previous research implies that experiencing mobility affects political and economic attitudes differently, depending on class origin and class destination (Lipset, 1960; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Kelley and Kelley, 2009).

Model 1 also includes the main effects of economic development, income inequality, and absolute mobility. We find here that the effect of absolute mobility is not statistically significant. Therefore, I must reject Hypothesis 3. This suggests that class identity is unaffected by the level of movement between classes

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for each country

| Country | Year | Mean Class Identity | National-level Data | | |
			Absolute Mobility	GDP Per Capita	Income Inequality
Argentina	2009	3.074	0.643	7,665	0.423
Australia	1999	3.271	0.736	26,128	0.275
Australia	2009	3.514	0.736	42,101	0.335
Belgium	2009	3.462	0.67	43,799	0.247
Bulgaria	2009	2.684	0.682	6,403	0.352
Canada	1999	3.499	0.71	27,135	0.315
Chile	1999	2.561	0.599	8,804	0.519
Chile	2009	2.561	0.656	9,487	0.497
China	2009	2.567	0. 502	8,400	0.542
Croatia	2009	3.518	0.689	14,323	0.376
Cyprus	2009	3.891	0.650	29,428	0.293
Czech Republic	1999	3.009	0.705	14,312	0.252
Czech Republic	2009	3.270	0.723	18,137	0.249
Denmark	2009	3.685	0.717	56,330	0.265
Estonia	2009	3.151	0.730	14,375	0.311
Finland	2009	3.387	0.779	44,890	0.254
Germany	1999	3.418	0.676	25,142	0.266
Hungary	1999	2.719	0.711	11,260	0.292
Hungary	2009	2.813	0.637	12,635	0.261
Iceland	2009	3.772	0.737	38,033	0.283
Israel	2009	3.504	0.73	39,459	0.37
Japan	2009	3.228	0.630	39,456	0.307
Korea	2009	3.361	0.59	17,110	0.314
Latvia	1999	2.885	0.73	4,200	0.322
Latvia	2009	3.106	0.710	11,476	0.365
New Zealand	1999	3.646	0.734	16,819	0.362
Norway	1999	3.685	0.740	29,800	0.223
Norway	2009	3.206	0.737	77,610	0.25
Poland	1999	2.923	0.7	16,113	0.318
Portugal	2009	2.761	0.637	22,016	0.34
Russia	2009	3.167	0.715	8,615	0.452
Slovakia	1999	3.242	0.688	10,399	0.246
Slovakia	2009	3.162	0.744	16,126	0.234
Spain	1999	3.609	0.603	19,824	0.366
Spain	2009	2.995	0.611	31,891	0.321
Sweden	1999	3.474	0.75	25,801	0.232
Sweden	2009	3.579	0.753	43,472	0.225
Switzerland	2009	3.658	0.686	63,568	0.302
Taiwan	2009	2.963	0.624	37,900	0.305
Turkey	2009	2.804	0.642	8,554	0.345
Ukraine	2009	2.767	0.722	2,545	0.295
USA	1999	3.044	0.711	33,298	0.368
USA	2009	3.134	0.718	45,793	0.359

Note. Countries are ordered alphabetically.

in society. This is particularly important when we re-call how diverse this sample is in terms of absolute mo-bility (see Table 1). Supporting previous research, economic development and income inequality both have a positive influence on class identification. As economic development and inequality rise, people are less likely to identify with the middle and upper classes.

Model 2 introduces a random effect that allows social class to have independent effects at the national level. Results from this model confirm that class

Table 2. Binomial hierarchical linear models predicting class identification

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	Estimate (SE)		Estimate (SE)		Estimate (SE)		Estimate (SE)	
Individual-level variables								
Intercept	−4.895***	(1.389)	−4.282***	(1.265)	−4.269***	(1.266)	−5.958***	(1.488)
Age	0.002	(0.001)	0.002	(0.001)	0.002	(0.001)	0.002	(0.001)
Gender (men)	0.087***	(0.029)	0.132***	(0.029)	0.132***	(0.029)	0.131***	(0.029)
Education								
Primary	0	–	0	–	0	–	0	–
Secondary	0.832***	(0.033)	0.845***	(0.034)	0.844***	(0.034)	0.843***	(0.034)
University degree	1.858***	(0.055)	1.822***	(0.056)	1.825***	(0.056)	1.829***	(0.056)
Social class (R)								
Working class	0	–	0	–	0	–	0	–
Professionals	1.452***	(0.048)	1.690***	(0.114)	1.686***	(0.104)	1.872***	(0.454)
Managers	1.474***	(0.075)	1.530***	(0.125)	1.523***	(0.119)	3.105*	(0.681)
Routine non-manual	0.723***	(0.033)	0.792***	(0.065)	0.793***	(0.062)	2.034*	(0.847)
Social class (F)								
Working class	0	–	0	–	0	–	0	–
Professionals	0.495***	(0.046)	0.504***	(0.046)	0.505***	(0.046)	0.504***	(0.046)
Managers	0.585***	(0.071)	0.585***	(0.072)	0.586***	(0.072)	0.588***	(0.072)
Routine non-manual	0.288***	(0.038)	0.288***	(0.038)	0.288***	(0.038)	0.289***	(0.038)
Survey year	0.722***	(0.192)	0.651***	(0.172)	0.658***	(0.173)	0.651***	(0.172)
National-level variables								
GDP	0.356*	(0.143)	0.290*	(0.130)	0.289*	(0.130)	0.464**	(0.152)
Gini	−2.888*	(1.562)	−2.971*	(1.416)	−1.580	(1.634)	−1.294	(1.640)
Absolute mobility	−2.611	(1.903)	−2.099	(1.774)	−2.073	(1.777)	−3.228	(2.039)
Class interactions								
Gini*class								
Professional					−4.465**	(1.481)	−3.834**	(1.698)
Manager					−3.799*	(1.786)	−3.716*	(1.780)
Routine non-manual					−2.141*	(0.877)	−2.140*	(0.881)
GDP*class								
Professional							−0.021	(0.147)
Manager							−0.165	(0.170)
Routine non-manual							−0.127	(0.086)
Absolute mobility*class								
Professional							2.253	(1.984)
Manager							2.906	(2.678)
Routine non-manual							1.835	(1.121)
Random effects								
Country variance	0.326		0.355		0.353		0.303	
Wave	0.007		0.023		0.020		0.423	
Resp. social class								
Professional			0.476		0.380		0.375	
Manager			0.419		0.355		0.332	
Routine non-manual			0.149		0.127		0.113	
Number of countries	33		33		33		33	
Number of individuals	33,481		33,481		33,481		33,481	
AIC	34,737		34,463		34,460		34,462	
					Final model			

Note. Standard errors (S.E) in parentheses.

*$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.001$.
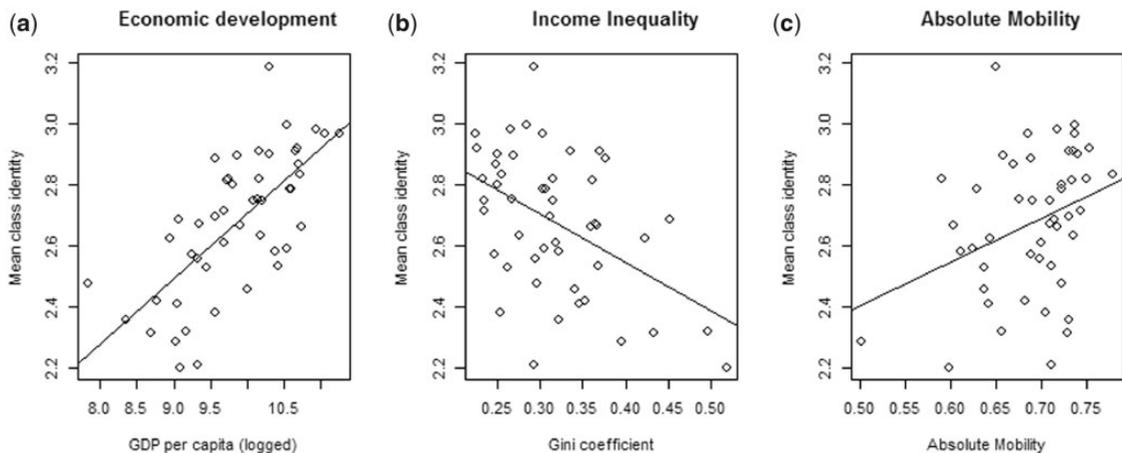
Figure 1. Country averages on a five-point scale by (a) level of economic development; (b) level of income inequality; and (c) level of absolute mobility.

functions differently across countries for class identity. In other words, a cross-level interaction between social class and national context may be important in working towards a theory of class identification. I now begin to parse out this relationship.

In doing so, Model 3 confirms the significance of income inequality in moderating the relationship between social class and class identification. While this finding has been previously shown for income, the role of occupational social class had yet to be previously explored. The random effects for social class and country variance are significantly reduced in this model, emphasizing the profound influence of income inequality on class identification. Moreover, the individual-level effects for social class are still highly statistically significant. Importantly, too, the Akaike information criterion (AIC) values for Model 3 indicate that it is the best-fitting model.

Lastly, building from Model 3, I present one final model. Here I add the interactive effect of social class on (i) economic development, and (ii) absolute mobility. This is done to show their *non-significance* for the relationship between social class and class identity. As the results show, neither term is statistically significant. An analysis of deviance further highlights the non-importance of economic development ($\chi^2 = 6.612$, $df = 3$, $P = 0.090$) and absolute mobility ($\chi^2 = 3.116$, $df = 3$, $P = 0.347$). More importantly, the social class and income inequality effect remains, and the coefficients change little from the previous model. This test shows that income inequality has a strong, independent effect on class identification. Finally, the AIC value for this model is a statistically worse fit. Therefore, in the name of simplicity and parsimony, I now conclude by

discussing the cross-level interaction between social class and income inequality from Model 3. Given that interpreting cross-level interactions is best done graphically, I have calculated fitted values for these results, which are displayed below in Figure 2.

This figure highlights new results on the relationship between social class, income inequality, and class identification. Rather than economic development being the national-level factor driving middle-class identification (Evans and Kelley, 2004), it is greater income equality that creates strong 'Middle/Upper'-class perceptions. In more equal countries, all classes identify more strongly as 'Middle/Upper' class. As this figure shows, class awareness is strongest when inequality is low. There is greater class differentiation and wider differences between each occupational category. In these societies, both 'professionals' and 'managers' identify more strongly with the 'Middle/Upper' class, compared with 'routine non-manual' and the 'working' class. In sum, when inequality is low, all social classes feel more affluent; yet, there is stronger class polarization in terms of 'Middle/Upper'-class identification. This implies that class awareness is more pronounced in equal societies.

The story is different in unequal societies, however. When inequality is high, all classes report weak 'Middle/Upper'-class identification. There is a strong negative effect for 'routine non-manual' workers, and the class identities of 'professionals' and 'managers' converge at high levels of income inequality. Moreover, there is broader convergence across all social classes as inequality becomes more pronounced. This finding suggests that when income inequality is high, it becomes less apparent people where they fit in the class structure, as
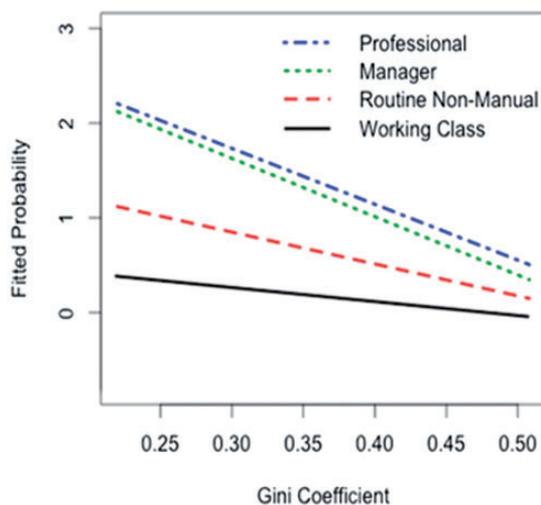
Figure 2. Class identification according to income inequality (Gini coefficient). Fitted values are from Model 3. All variables except respondent's social class and income inequality are set to typical values. This model predicts the likelihood of identifying with the 'Middle/Upper' classes, relative to the 'Lower/Working Classes'.

people from higher occupational positions become less likely to differentiate themselves from other social classes. Perhaps, this is because when inequality is high, its negative consequences are more acutely felt across classes, thus lowering average class identification, and thereby muting the relationship between occupational social class and class identity. This theory is elaborated in the section that follows.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study provides new evidence regarding the relationship between social class, mobility, and class identification. I have shown that social class matters a great deal for class identification. My findings also indicate that class origin is a strong indicator of class identity. This suggests a lingering socialization process related to the economic conditions people were exposed to early in life. These findings provide even further evidence that class matters for social and political values in modern society.

Nevertheless, the effect of class origin is the same for all classes. This finding casts doubt on the common conjecture that the experience of class socialization is different for each social class, and speaks to the profound influence of early class socialization. My results also question the common conjecture that experiencing mobility shapes people's class identities, leading to even

greater class awareness (Lipset, 1960; Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Kelley and Kelley, 2009). In this regard, I found no evidence that people react against the values of their class of origin after experiencing mobility.[8–11]

This study also found that national-level absolute mobility does *not* influence class identification. Recall that 33 societies over 43 contexts from 1999 to 2009 were explored. Over this period, rates of absolute mobility fluctuated both within and across the societies in this pooled sample. In fact, movement between classes during this period was remarkable. The fact that this measure did not meaningfully explain variation in class identification is intriguing, and most importantly, casts doubt on the classical conjecture that social mobility at the national level decreases class politics. I present two possible explanations can be taken from this finding. First, and most obvious, it is possible that people are unaware of social mobility. Some comparative work exists on this topic. It finds significant cross-national differences in attitudes towards subjective mobility, but also that the relationship between subjective and actual mobility is not particularly strong (Kelley and Kelley, 2009).

Second, it is possible that class structures have become so complex that it is not clear to people whether their own class movement has been 'up' or 'down'. My results regarding the non-effect of individual-level mobility are consistent with this idea. When people think about social class, it is possible that instead of picturing a common collective, they turn instead to an assessment of their own immediate economic conditions. My findings of the strong influence of class origin and current class position support this claim. Peoples' class identities are shaped by the economic conditions that they experience. The conclusions drawn from this research imply that changes to the class structure matter much less for class politics than previously theorized (c.f. Marx, 1894; Sorokin, 1927, 1959; Lipset and Bendix, 1959; Goldthorpe, 1980; Heath, 1981). Importantly, these findings suggest that there is little reason to believe that class will lose its political significance, even if class structures continue to evolve.

I must also reflect on the role of income inequality. While income inequality has previously been identified as important for class identity, it has only been recognized as important in moderating the relationship between individual-level income and class identification. These new results suggest a more profound influence. As others have shown (Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Curtis, 2013), income inequality has a polarizing effect on the relationship between income and class identity. To be brief, the rich and the poor have greater class awareness

when income inequality is *high*, while class attitudes are far more muted in more equal societies. When occupational social class is considered instead of income, the opposite is true, however. In more equal societies, class identities become more polarized than in less equal ones. When inequality is high, attitudes converge and fewer people across the class structure identify as middle and upper class. In other words, the relationship between occupational social class and class identification becomes less clear. This speaks to the lack of a 'common collective', because people higher in the class structure feel that they do not belong to their own social class.

This finding has political and policy implications. If greater inequality is associated with weaker upper- and middle-class identification, it is possible that people in less equal societies will eventually form attitudes that are favourable towards equality, irrespective of their class position. Some recent research supports this claim. Curtis and Andersen (2015) find that in unequal societies, the attitudes of *all* classes converge and people become supportive of redistribution and income equality. The results presented in this study imply a similar logic: driven by an awareness of income inequality, people across the class structure recognize that their economic fortunes are different from top-income earners. If inequality continues to rise, it is possible that people will become more supportive of income redistribution and social policy geared towards greater equality.

The opposite may be true, however. It is possible that income inequality will lead to even greater social unrest. It is well known that inequality is associated with various social problems, including distrust of government, political apathy, and low social trust and cohesion (Uslaner, 2002; Uslaner and Brown, 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). It is often thought that these consequences are only felt among the lower classes. My results suggest that this discontent may climb up the class ladder. If most people in society feel lower in the class hierarchy, it implies that discontent and exclusion may be experienced as well. This speaks to the importance of equality and redistributive politics to ensure a well-functioning society (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010).

In conclusion, it is widely accepted that for class to have a significant impact on politics, people must be aware of their class position and have a basic understanding of the causes and consequences of economic inequality (Weakliem, 1993; Sosnaud *et al.*, 2013). My results provide strong evidence to suggest that people understand their position in the class structure, and that inequality significantly affects this relationship. Although I use cross-sectional data, and hence cannot assess trends over time, the results presented here are consistent with the idea that rising inequality over the past several decades has altered class awareness. If that is true, class politics may rise again soon.

Notes

1 Most recent comparative work has used family income as a measure of social class. This article builds on existing work by using a measure of occupation, recoded into several distinct class categories (Andersen and Fetner, 2008; Hout *et al.*, 1999).

2 Also, this analysis explores individual-level social mobility—i.e. the interaction between respondent's class and father's class. Including this term with an already sparse six-category dependent variable expanded the amount of sparse cell categories—for example, a professional respondent from working-class origins who self-identifies as 'lower middle' class. The hierarchical linear models also include random effects for class and wave, three level-two predictors, as well as various cross-level interaction terms—all of which were necessary to test my hypotheses.

3 I tested for non-linearity effects for age by using an orthogonal quadratic polynomial. However, it did not provide a statistical improvement over the final models with the simple linear effect.

4 Although the *SWIID* database could have been used for each measure of inequality, I decided to use data from the OECD, given that the other contextual variables in this study were also derived from this database.

5 This model is not reported in the Table 2 results section, given that the mobility interaction term was not statistically significant.

6 In an earlier test, I confirmed that coefficients for respondent's class change little once class origin is included in the statistical models. This suggests that father's class holds a strong and independent effect on class identification.

7 Given the statistical non-significance of this model, I have not included it in Table 2. However, its result may be seen on request.

8 My results differ from the studies mentioned because they do not directly explore class identification, but instead perceptions of subjective mobility (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005; Kelley and Kelley, 2009).

9 All models include individual-level variables, as well as a random component for country, wave, and respondent's social class position.

10   In each of the models, respondent's social class—not father's—is used in the multiplicative effects.

11   Presented as Model 4 in Table 2.

Acknowledgements

Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *ESR* online.

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Appendix

Table A1. AIC values for models fitted to pooled data

Model	Model terms[9]	AIC values
M3	GINI*Class[10] + GDP + Mobility	34,460
M4	GDP * Class + GINI + Mobility	34,462
M5	Mobility * Class + GINI + Mobility	34,464
M6	GINI* Class + GDP* Class + Mobility	34,461
M7	GINI* Class + Mobility * Class + GDP	34,464
M8	GDP* Class + Mobility * Class + GINI	34,463
M9[11]	GINI* Class lass + Mobility * Class + GDP* Class	34,462