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1

Individualization and the Decline of Class Identity

Anthony Heath, John Curtice and Gabriella Elgenius

Introduction

Many writers have suggested that as we move from an industrial to a post-industrial society, traditional social identities such as class will decline in social significance (Clark and Lipset, 1991; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; though compare Hout et al., 1993). Clark and Lipset, for example, have posed the question, 'Are classes dying?', while in a book entitled *The Death of Class* Pakulski and Waters have penned what is in effect an obituary of the concept. The idea is particularly prominent in the work of writers such as Ulrich Beck who have spoken of the individualization of modern society. For Beck, class is a 'zombie category': 'the idea lives on even though the reality to which it corresponds is dead' (Beck and Willms, 2004: 51–52 cited in Atkinson, 2007: 354). On this account, individuals are no longer members of stable social communities whose members all share in the same distinctive 'life-world', but instead are people 'condemned to choose' their own life-worlds.

These writers do not necessarily claim that class inequalities *per se* have disappeared; 'the structure of social inequality... displays a surprising *stability*,' note Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001: 30; although Beck, for example, does argue that instead of being concentrated in the working class, risks are now much more evenly spread across the different classes). Their concern is not with 'objective' inequalities; rather, their arguments are about classes as social formations that have a sense of group belonging and solidarity. In other words, the focus is on *subjective* class identities and their allegedly declining significance in post-industrial society. Many, including Clark and Lipset and Pakulski and Waters, concentrate specifically on the decline of class identity and of class as a social formation, while for others such as Beck, Giddens, or

Bauman the decline of class is part of a more general thesis about the decline of all kinds of social identities rooted in traditional, inherited, social groups. The key claim in Beck's account is that individuals are no longer so firmly rooted in 'given' social identities that provide social bases for what people think or how they behave. Thus so far as class in particular is concerned Beck draws on Marx's distinction between class 'in itself' and class 'for itself': 'There emerges a capitalism without classes, more precisely: without classes *for themselves*. Individualization uncouples class culture from class position' (Beck, 2007: 686, italics in the original). As Scott has summarized the thesis: 'Class relations may not have disappeared completely, but they have become less corporate, less collective and less communal in character' (Scott, 2002: 32).

There is however remarkably little empirical research that systematically investigates the decline of class communities. To be sure there has been a large volume of empirical research on the declining (or otherwise) relationship between 'objective' class and voting behaviour that addresses some of the themes advanced by Clark and Lipset (see, for example, Evans, 1999; Heath et al., 1985; Lee and Turner, 1996). But to our knowledge there has not been any systematic empirical enquiry into how the subjective aspects of class have changed over time. There are many notable recent studies of class identity, such as Savage et al. (2001), whose findings suggest that class identities nowadays are weak. But all of these studies look at the position at a single point in time and therefore cannot convincingly demonstrate that class identities have *weakened* over time. Our aim in this chapter is to fill this gap and to provide a more rigorous empirical evaluation of the main claims about the decline of class as a social identity.¹

There are four distinct claims that we can derive from the two sets of theoretical accounts described above. The first two flow from both sets of literatures, while the remaining two are specific to the wider literature on individualization. First, it is argued that social class no longer provides as strong a basis of social identity as it once did. Even if individuals still use the language of social class, and agree to locate themselves as members of a particular social class, they are now less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to that class. As Savage has suggested, while individuals may still use the terminology of social class, 'class position no longer generates a deep sense of identity and belonging' (Savage, 2000: 37, 111–16).

Secondly, both sets of accounts assume that, even among those who still adhere to them, collective class identities have reduced force and are less influential for social action. One way of translating this kind of

claim into testable sociology is to treat it as a claim about the declining role of social classes as normative reference groups (Merton, 1957). Do people who feel a sense of community with other members of their group also follow their group in their attitudes and behaviour? The implication of the accounts of Clark and Lipset, Pakulski and Waters, and of Beck or Scott is that these older forms of identity are no longer such powerful stimuli to collective or indeed to individual action as they once were, and no longer constitute significant reference points for values and action. 'The attachment of people to a social class (in Max Weber's sense) has nevertheless become weaker. It now has much less influence on their actions' (Beck, 1992: 92).

A third claim that is particularly prominent in Beck's thesis of individualization is that because people now choose their own life-worlds and biographies, social identities are no longer inherited in the way they once were. This implies that class identity is now related more weakly to one's social class origins than it once was. Earlier accounts of the formation of class identity suggested that it was learned through socialization in one's family of origin (Reissman, 1960: 234). While it was assumed that class identities would change over time if one experienced social mobility, the standard sociological literature suggested that class origins would have a lasting legacy on one's identity, albeit declining in force across the life cycle. In contrast, Beck suggests that in today's post-modern 'risk society', class identities, 'become relatively independent of inherited or newly formed ties (e.g. family, neighbourhood, friendship, or partnership). By becoming independent from traditional ties, people's lives take on an independent quality which, for the first time, makes possible the experience of a personal destiny' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 33).

Fourthly, Beck is quite clear that one's own current occupational position will be more weakly related to class identity. 'The argument of the individualization theorists is that objective features (income, position in the hierarchy) and subjective features (consciousness, lifestyle, leisure interests, political attitudes) *diverge*.' (Beck, 2007: 686, italics in original). Because the occupations in which people are employed are now the product of individual decisions and attributes rather than collective forces over which they have little control, those in the same class position no longer necessarily think of themselves as sharing a common life trajectory. We expect to find, therefore, a de-coupling of the so-called objective and subjective aspects of class.

Although both sets of accounts point towards the first two claims about the declining strength and power of class identity, there are,

however, some differences in the processes that are thought to be responsible. For writers such as Clark and Lipset or Pakulski and Waters, strong social classes are features of an earlier stage of industrial development centred on traditional manufacturing industry. Thanks to the decline of heavy industries and their associated stable communities, together with increasing affluence, social mobility, and the decline of trade unions this world no longer exists. So in essence these arguments focus on general long-term processes of economic growth and development and the associated process of industrial restructuring.

Beck in contrast emphasizes the way in which certain institutional features of post-modern society, especially the organization of the labour market and the welfare state, undermine class cohesion and ensure that life chances depend on decisions made by individuals. Success – or failure – in the (post-)modern highly competitive labour market depends on individuals' ability to acquire educational qualifications (a process which in itself undermines traditional forms of thinking) and the personal career choices they subsequently make. As Beck puts it: 'as soon as people enter the labour market... they are forced to take charge of their own life. The labour market... reveals itself as a driving force behind the individualization of people's lives' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 32–33).² The welfare state, meanwhile, increasingly assigns rights and responsibilities to people on the basis of the decisions they make as individuals rather than on account of their membership of collective groups or social institutions such as the family. In such a world, according to Beck's famous aphorism, 'Community is dissolved in the acid bath of competition' (1992: 94).

However, there is a third possible explanation for the decline of class identities, one that we ourselves have previously developed in the British context. This points to top-down changes and in particular New Labour's deliberate attempt to move away from its traditional electoral territory and to cultivate the centre ground.³ On this account (the intellectual origins of which can be traced back to Karl Marx), class identities are not simply spontaneous grass-roots occurrences but can be stimulated, or inhibited, by political organization. For a long period in Britain, Labour was seen as the party of the working class, followed a programme designed more or less overtly to protect working-class interests, and actively organized in working-class constituencies. Under the pressure of electoral failure and recognizing the declining size of the working class, Labour, first under Neil Kinnock and then much more dramatically under Tony Blair, deliberately cut loose from its working-class image and became a catch-all party of the centre ground. Thus whereas in 1987, no

less than 46% of people believed that Labour looked ‘very closely’ after the interests of working-class people, and as many as 33% still did so in 1997, by 2005, the figure had fallen to just 10% (Curtice, 2007). So, with working-class identity no longer being promoted by Labour, fewer people may have come to feel the impetus to acknowledge or feel attached to a class, or to regard their class identity as a cue as to what attitudes they should adopt towards political issues.

These three sets of explanations not only differ in their explanation of the decline of class identities, but also when the change is expected to have occurred. The decline of heavy industry and rising affluence that lie at the heart of the ‘death of class’ thesis occurred gradually throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century (although perhaps accelerating in the 1970s), and so this argument suggests that class identities have declined over the same extended period. In contrast, the individualizing role of the labour market is likely to have been given added impetus, at least in Britain, by the Thatcherite reforms of the 1980s which deregulated the labour market. So the individualization thesis points to the 1980s as the time when the decline of class identities would have accelerated. Meanwhile, Tony Blair rebranded Labour as New Labour in the mid-1990s before securing power in 1997. So if the top-down political thesis is correct, then any change should only date from the mid-1990s.

Our key research aims in this chapter, therefore, are

- To establish whether there has been decline in the proportions adhering to a traditional class identity and/or a decline in the strength of belonging to social class;
- To examine whether class identities are decreasingly inherited from one’s family;
- To examine whether they are increasingly uncoupled from one’s current occupation;
- To explore whether there has been decline in the relationship between adherence to a class identity and individuals’ political attitudes and partisanship.
- To investigate the timing of any changes which have occurred.

Empirical material

To investigate these research questions, we draw on the series of British Election Surveys (BES), which have been conducted after every general election since 1964 together with the 2005 British Social Attitudes (BSA)

survey. Social class identity was one of the central concerns of the political scientists who designed the first BES (Butler and Stokes, 1974) and the 1964 BES (together with a pre-election survey conducted in 1963) included a number of questions on class identity that subsequently have been administered in the election studies on a regular basis. Thus by replicating a number of these questions on the 2005 BSA we can not only look at long-term changes over a period of 40 years, but also look at the timing of any changes that have occurred.

Of course, it would be even better if we had readings from the 1950s. However, it is still the case that Britain in 1963/1964, when our time series begins, remained very similar to the Britain of the 1950s: class voting was still at a very high level just as it had been in the 1950s (see Weakliem and Heath, 1999) and the restructuring of industry, the decline of traditional manufacturing, the rise of the knowledge-based service economy, and the expansion of professional and managerial occupations were only just in their very early stages (see Halsey and Webb, 2000). Our time series does then arguably go back to a period (just) before Britain's transformation into a post-industrial society.

The BESs are all nationally representative probability samples, designed to provide coverage of the electorate living in private households, though until 1970 this meant those aged 21 and over rather than 18 or above. Note that, in response to increasing disparity between the adult resident population and those included on the electoral register, the sampling frame was switched in 1997 from the electoral register to the Postcode Address File. The 1992 and 1997 BESs included over-samples in Scotland, and these have been down-weighted in order to make these samples as a whole representative of Great Britain. Our key measure of class identity was included in the 1964, 1970, 1974 (October election), 1983, 1987, 1992, and 1997 BESs and hence these are the years that we include in our analysis, together with the 2005 BSA. Note that in 1964, 1970, and 2005, the measure of class identity we use was only asked of half samples of the relevant survey; this means that the sample sizes for 1964 and 1970 in particular are relatively small.

Like the BES, the BSA is a representative probability sample of individuals living in private households in Great Britain. It also uses the Postcode Address File as its sampling frame. The BSA series began in 1983, but in earlier years it used a different measure of class identity from the one used in the BES. The data are weighted to take into account both differential probability of selection and known patterns of non-response.

We use the time series provided by these two survey series to answer our five key research questions. We begin by looking at the incidence of class identity, then move on to look at the de-coupling of class identity from one's class origins and from one's own occupation and turn finally to the role of class as a normative reference group.

Incidence of class identity

Our first task is to establish whether there has been a decline in the proportions adhering to traditional class identities and/or a decline in the strength of belonging to social class. The early BESs experimented with a number of ways of asking about class identity. One version in particular has stood the test of time and been repeated in many subsequent studies. Respondents were asked

Do you ever think of yourself as belonging to any particular class?

IF YES Which one is that?

IF NO (or YES but other than middle or working class) Most people say they belong to either the middle class or to the working class.

Do you ever think of yourself as being in one of these classes?

We can think of the first, unprompted, question as tapping respondents' own identities and it is perhaps the key question from our point of view. Respondents were of course free to volunteer the name of any class that they wished but the great majority volunteered 'middle class' or 'working class'. The follow-up question, addressed to those who did not respond 'middle' or 'working class' to the initial question and which prompts respondents to choose one of those two labels, is likely to tap a more superficial recognition of class differences. It thus might identify, as Savage suggests, people who are happy to use the language of social class but for whom the term has no deeper significance. Table 1.1 shows the trends over time in both prompted and unprompted responses.

The table suggests that there has not been any move away from class identity generally or from unprompted class identity in particular. Even at the beginning of our series in 1964, only a little under half the respondents declared unprompted that they were either middle or working class, and the position was much the same in 2005. The percentages giving unprompted responses bumped around somewhat, rising to a peak in 1983, when issues of social class were perhaps particularly salient as party politics polarized between a middle-class-oriented Conservative party under Margaret Thatcher and a working-class-oriented 'Old'

Table 1.1 Prompted and unprompted class identity, 1964–2005

	Column percentages							
	1964	1970	1974	1983	1987	1992	1997	2005
Unprompted: middle class	14	16	17	20	16	16	20	20
Unprompted: working class	34	25	25	33	30	29	31	25
Total unprompted	48	41	41	53	46	45	51	45
Prompted: middle class	16	17	17	14	18	18	17	17
Prompted: working class	31	38	38	27	31	30	30	32
Did not identify with any class	4	4	4	6	5	6	2	6
N	832	731	2329	3637	3795	2672	2906	2102

Notes: The 1974 survey is the one following the October general election. 1992 and 1997 are weighted to correct for over-sample in Scotland, and 2005 is weighted to account for differential refusal. DK/refused are included with the category 'did not identify with any class'. Respondents aged 21 and over in 1964.

Sources: 1964–1997 British Election Studies; 2005 BSA.

Labour Party under Michael Foot, though they were almost as high when class-consensual New Labour won the 1997 election. But in any event, there is clearly no underlying downward movement of the sort expected by some theorists.

What has changed is the balance between those calling themselves 'middle class' and those claiming to be 'working class'. In 1964, for every person calling themselves middle class there were over two who said they were working class. In 2005, the ratio was closer to 2:3. In short, while the incidence of class identities overall has not declined, but that of working-class identities has – we clearly should not mistake the latter for the former. The decline in working-class identity almost certainly reflects the changes over the period in the shape of the 'objective' class structure, as defined by the actual numbers of people in manual and non-manual jobs.

Even so, it is notable that whereas sociologists typically claim that the proportion of manual jobs has now declined to much less than 50% of the labour force, the proportion who (either prompted or unprompted) identify themselves as working class is still clearly in a considerable majority. Even in 2005, 57% of respondents in total defined themselves

as working class while only 37% defined themselves as middle class. One possible explanation for this, in line with the socialization theories mentioned in the introduction, is that class identities are learned in childhood and thus reflect one's class origins. The net upward mobility that has occurred in Britain over much of our period (see e.g. Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004; Heath and Payne, 2000) means that the proportion of people with working-class origins greatly exceeds the proportion currently in working-class situations.

So Table 1.1 provides little support therefore for the claim that class as a social identity has died or disappeared. However, there is a further question, asked in the 1963 pre-election wave of the BES, that more explicitly taps the key aspect of a deeper sense of belonging. In that wave, respondents were asked in respect of the class with which they said they identified

Some people feel they have a lot in common with other people of their own class, but others don't feel this way so much. How about you? Would you say you feel ... READ OUT ...
pretty close to other [middle/working] class people,
or, that you don't feel much closer to them than you do to people in other classes?

We replicated this question in 2005, but it is available only in these two years and hence we cannot look at the intermediate years. The results for 1963 and 2005 are given in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 The strength of belonging to one's social class

	Column percentages	
	1963	2005
Class identity		
Close to middle class	14	14
Middle class but not close	13	22
Neither	6	6
Working class but not close	29	35
Close to working class	37	22
<i>N</i>	1938	2102

Note: The direction of class identity was obtained in 1963 from a question worded differently from that asked in 2005. For details, see Butler and Stokes (1974: 476).

Sources: BES 1963 and BSA 2005.

In replication of the results of Table 1.1, we see an increase in the percentage defining themselves as middle class and a decline in the percentage regarding themselves as working class. In contrast to what we would have anticipated from Table 1.1, however, the table also shows a clear change in the sense of closeness to one's class. In 1963, rather more than half of each class felt close to their class, but by 2005, this proportion had fallen, in both classes, to around two fifths. This is not perhaps a very dramatic change when we consider that the table covers a time span of 42 years; if it reflects a gradual change, then it is indeed a rather slow, almost 'glacial', rate of change. But it is at least in the direction predicted by the theorists.

It is also worth noting moreover that, even in 1963, the sense of class belonging was not all that strong, and was only slightly stronger in the working class than it was in the middle class. (Again, this mirrors the picture from the prompted/unprompted class identity distinction in Table 1.1.) This suggests that our theorists may well have been exaggerating the extent of class solidarity that existed in Britain before the country embarked on its transformation into a post-industrial society. Indeed, Marshall et al. (1988) have previously drawn attention to this tendency among theorists to (mis)remember and perhaps romanticize the class solidarity of their youth.

The answer to our first question is therefore somewhat ambivalent. We see no sign of a decline in the willingness to use the language of class but there is some evidence of relatively modest decline in the strength of belonging to one's class over the 42 years since 1963. We next move on to consider whether the evidence on the claimed 'de-coupling' of subjective class from own or father's occupational position is any more encouraging for our theorists.

In Table 1.3, we classify respondents according to their father's class, using a classification that is widely used in sociological research and which distinguishes the professional and managerial positions of the 'salarariat' from lower-level routine non-manual workers, the petty bourgeoisie of small employers and the self-employed, the skilled working class (including supervisors of manual workers), and the lower grades of semi- and unskilled workers (including routine personal service workers).⁴ (For details of this scheme and its theoretical rationale see Goldthorpe, 2007.)

Since much of the theoretical literature implicitly focuses on the decline of working-class solidarity and identity in particular, in Table 1.3 we show the percentage from each social class origin who defined themselves as working class (grouping together both the prompted and

Table 1.3 Fathers' class and respondents' class identity: Percentage giving a working-class identity (prompted and unprompted combined)

Father's class	Cell percentages							
	1964	1970	1974	1983	1987	1992	1997	2005
Salariat	28	34	28	32	31	37	37	35
Routine non-manual	54	27	46	52	48	39	51	51
Petty bourgeoisie	53	50	53	50	53	50	53	53
Supervisors or skilled manual	73	66	72	64	73	67	70	71
Semi- and unskilled manual	78	78	72	72	75	74	77	69
All	66	62	62	59	62	59	62	58
Gap	50	44	44	40	44	37	40	34

Gap: Percentage semi- and unskilled manual saying they are working class minus the proportion of the salariat doing so.

Sources: BES 1964–1997, BSA 2005.

unprompted responses described earlier). As it happens similar patterns are evident for middle-class identity and for unprompted working-class identity on its own.

The key question we have to ask of these data is whether there has been any convergence over time in the proportions from each class origin who espouse a working-class identity. If Beck is right to suppose that class identity is decreasingly inherited, then the association between father's class and respondent's identity would be expected to weaken over time. In Table 1.3, this would most obviously show up as a narrowing of the gap in the proportion claiming a working-class identity between respondents from salariat backgrounds and those from working-class origins. We show this gap in the bottom row of the table.⁵

As we can see, there is some bumpiness in the trends, almost certainly reflecting sampling error, which can be especially large in some of the smaller classes such as the routine non-manual class. But there are two clear findings. First, in all years, there is a definite gradient with respondents from salariat origins being much less likely to define themselves as working class than are respondents from the skilled or semi-/unskilled classes. Family background is persistently associated with current class identity. Secondly, however, the gap between people from salariat and working-class origins has shrunk over time, down from a 50 percentage

point difference in 1964 to a 34 point difference in 2005. It seems that family background makes rather less difference than it once did.

Still, the change is hardly on a revolutionary scale – less than half a point change each year – and should lead us to be sceptical about some of the more dramatic claims of Beck and Giddens. Moreover, the readings for the period between 1970 and 1997 barely show any change at all. But even leaving that aside, much of the change had occurred by 1983, that is, before the liberalization of the labour market which we see as such a key part of Beck's explanation of individualization.

Table 1.4 presents a parallel analysis of the changing relationship over time between one's own occupational class and subjective class identity.⁶ It shows a similar picture to the previous table. Those in manual occupations are consistently more likely to have a working-class identity; those in the salariat are least likely to do so. Equally, however, the gap appears to have declined over time, though again much of the decline seems to have occurred by 1983, before the Thatcherite liberalization of the labour market had taken effect.

However, we should exercise some caution in drawing conclusions from such bivariate analysis. Both in Table 1.4 and in our previous analysis of father's class one reason why the gap might have fallen is because of changes in the pattern of social mobility. Perhaps, for example, the difference between those in the salariat and those in semi- and unskilled occupations in terms of the occupations pursued by their fathers has

Table 1.4 Own occupational class and subjective class identity: Percentage giving a working-class identity

Own class	Cell percentages							
	1964	1970	1974	1983	1987	1992	1997	2005
Salariat	32	36	36	38	38	36	41	42
Routine non-manual	53	55	53	53	58	59	63	58
Petty bourgeoisie	45	49	53	48	60	53	62	58
Supervisors or skilled manual	81	81	78	71	78	74	79	77
Semi- and unskilled manual	85	81	78	74	76	75	76	72
All	66	62	62	59	62	59	61	57
Gap	53	45	42	36	38	39	35	30

Gap: Percentage semi- and unskilled manual saying they are working class minus the proportion of the salariat doing so.

Sources: BES 1964–1997, BSA 2005.

narrowed. Equally, perhaps father's class is likely to be strongly related nowadays to respondent's class. Such changes would reduce the strength of the bivariate relationships in Tables 1.3 and 1.4 even if the independent impact of father's class on class identity after controlling for the effect of respondent's class was unchanged, as was the independent effect of respondent's class on class identity after controlling for father's class. And if the independent effect of the two classes on class identities is largely unchanged, then it is far from clear that individuals have become more likely to choose their own class identities.

There was, indeed, some sign in our data series that the relationship between father's and respondent's class has weakened over time (see also Heath and Payne, 2000).⁷ Indeed when we took this into account in a multivariate analysis – and also took into account the possibility that the relationship between objective and subjective class may differ between men and women – we found that there was no consistent evidence that the relationship between subjective class and either father's class or respondent's class has weakened (see Heath et al., 2009, Appendices 1 and 2 for this material). In fact in the case of women respondents, class seems to have come to matter more as partner's class has declined, evidence perhaps of individualization within the family of the kind Beck would anticipate but not of de-coupling of the link between class position and class identity.

We can also obtain a slightly different perspective on whether class identities have become de-coupled from occupation-based class position from a further question that was asked in 1963 and replicated in 2005 (but was not asked in the intermediate years). Respondents were asked an open-ended question

What sort of people would you say belong to the middle class?

What sort of people would you say belong to the working class?

If indeed occupation is now less likely to influence class identity, then one might anticipate that fewer people would define class membership in occupational terms in response to these questions. The outcome is shown in Table 1.5. In 1963, over half of the sample said that they thought that middle-class people were ones with white-collar (or similar) jobs, while two-thirds said that they thought working-class people were ones with blue-collar (or similar) jobs. In 2005, the type of occupation someone was in remained the primary characteristic associated with class membership, but the proportion linking occupation with class was around fifteen points below what it had been 40 years earlier.

Table 1.5 The declining occupational basis of class? The sort of people who belong to the middle and working classes

Sort of people who belong to the...	Percentage of responses			
	1963		2005	
	Middle class	Working class	Middle class	Working class
White/blue collar	55	66	40	53
Rich/poor	20	9	29	23
Manners and morals (1963)/educated (2005)	5	6	8	8
Other response	8	8	10	5
None	12	11	13	11
<i>N</i>	2009	2009	2102	2102

Note: Multiple response analysis with both first and second mentions included in the numerator and respondents who said 'none' (at the first mention) included in the denominator.

Sources: BES 1963 and BSA 2005.

Meanwhile, there was a clear increase in the proportion who associated class with income differences between rich and poor. However, even in 2005, income clearly took second place behind occupation as a marker of class position in the eyes of our respondents.⁸

This evidence is then in line with the expectations of theorists who believe that change is occurring and that the occupational basis of class identity is eroding. However, the changes are modest; class is still predominantly seen in occupational terms, albeit less so than it once was. Moreover, it does not necessarily follow that because class is likely to be regarded in occupational terms, the impact of occupational position on class identity has weakened. But in any event, it appears that once again the theorists may have confused a (modest) direction of change with a wholesale transformation. It would be completely false to claim that, to paraphrase Beck, the symbiosis of occupation and class identity has been shattered. Modified, perhaps, but not shattered.

Probably the most important claim underlying the death of class thesis, however, is that class identities and subcultures no longer have the same power or influence over people's social actions that they once did. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim asserted '[classes] lose their independent identities and the chance to become a formative political force' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 39).

A simple way to explore this is to investigate whether class identity is decreasingly linked to the distinctive patterns of political partisanship traditionally associated with the different classes. Writing about the 1960s, Butler and Stokes, for example, argued that Labour was regarded as the party of the working class and that some (though by no means all) working-class voters supported Labour simply because it was the working-class party. More specifically, if class identities and class sub-cultures really are influential, we would expect to find that people who feel a stronger sense of community with other members of their class will be more likely to support their traditional class party. If, then, social class has lost its role as a normative reference group for its members, we expect to find not only a convergence between members of different classes in their patterns of partisanship (the so-called 'class dealignment') in general but also a specific convergence between those who feel close to their class and those who do not. After all, if people who felt close to the working class were just the same in their support for Labour as those who said they were working class but did not feel close to other working-class people, then there would be no need to invoke the concept of normative reference group: straightforward class interest alone would be a sufficient explanation.

We examine this hypothesis using the distinction between the prompted and unprompted responses to the class identity question since this question has been asked regularly over time and thus enables us to chart changes and when they occurred. However, in so far as we can, we have replicated our results using the 'closeness' questions that were only asked in 1963 and 2005.

We focus on Labour identity in Table 1.6. The variation in the overall level of Labour partisanship (shown in the penultimate row of the table) parallels the changes in the party's electoral fortunes with the party's support declining massively between 1974 and 1983 and then recovering in 1997. We can also see how in 1997 and 2005 New Labour particularly appealed to the middle class amongst whom levels of Labour partisanship reached higher levels than in any previous elections.

This rise of Labour support in the middle classes of course in turn led to a sharp decline in the overall gap between the classes and we therefore see a very clear pattern of convergence between the classes, sometimes described as class dealignment. (For detailed discussion of the class dealignment debate, see Evans, 1999.) This convergence, as illustrated by the gap between the unprompted middle and working-class identifiers (the WCU:MCU gap in the penultimate row of the table) in their support for Labour, declines albeit very unevenly from

Table 1.6 Class identity and Labour partisanship: Percentage with a Labour identity

Class identity	Cell percentages							
	1964	1970	1974	1983	1987	1992	1997	2005
Middle class unprompted	17	31	24	18	18	17	32	34
Middle class prompted	11	19	20	12	12	13	26	22
Neither	10	21	24	17	16	15	32	28
Working class prompted	47	45	42	29	29	32	43	41
Working class unprompted	66	60	63	52	51	54	61	47
All	42	41	40	31	30	32	43	37
WCU:MCU Gap	49	29	39	34	33	37	29	13
WCU:WCP Gap	19	15	21	23	22	22	18	6

WCU:MCU Gap: Percentage of working class unprompted identifying with Labour minus the percentage of middle class unprompted. Labour identifiers are those who say 'Labour' in response to the question, 'Generally speaking, do you usually consider yourself Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat or what?'

WCU:WPU Gap: Percentage of working class unprompted identifying with Labour minus the percentage of working class prompted.

Sources: BES 1964–1997, BSA 2005.

49 percentage points in 1964 to a meagre 13 points in 2005 – a much larger decline than any we have seen so far. However, it is also very striking that this gap does not shrink at all during the 22 years between 1970 and 1992 (a period that might be termed one of 'trendless fluctuation'), but then falls by a further 24 points in the 13 years to 2005.

Even more striking is the sharp decline in the gap between prompted and unprompted working-class identifiers (the WCU:WCP gap in the bottom row of the table). This had consistently been around 20 points from 1964 to 1997 but collapsed suddenly to six points in 2005. It is this collapse that is crucial for the normative reference group argument. What we see is that only over this most recent period, the period of New Labour when the party dropped its emphasis on its working-class roots, has class most clearly lost its force as a normative reference group. The changed politics of the Labour party looks a more plausible explanation of the weakened relationship between class identity and partisanship than theories of individualization.

Conclusions

We began this chapter by asking a series of questions. Has there been a decline in class identity in the sense that people are now less likely than they used to be to identify with a social class or are less likely to feel a deep attachment to their class? Has a sense of class identity become de-coupled either from one's social origins or from one's current occupational position – in other words, is class identity less 'given' and more 'chosen' than it used to be? Is there any sense in which class has become a less powerful 'normative reference group' than it used to be? And finally, if there are changes, does the timing of the changes give us any clues as to which of the rival theoretical interpretations is most likely to be sound?

Our research, which we believe to be the first really systematic empirical investigation of these questions, suggests the following:

- First, people still use the language of class and there has been little change in the proportions who are willing to assign themselves to a social class (either prompted or unprompted).
- But there has been a relatively small but nonetheless noticeable decline in the strength of belonging to one's class.
- People are somewhat less likely to consider class membership to be defined by occupational position, while there has been a relatively modest but noticeable de-coupling of class identity both from one's social origins (as measured by father's class) and from one's current occupation. However, this latter trend appears largely to reflect changes in the pattern of social mobility rather than greater freedom to choose one's identity.
- There has been a dramatic decline in the strength of class as a normative reference group, at least as measured by its relationship with support for the Labour Party.

All the changes we have identified are in the direction, although far from the magnitude, predicted by Beck, and we do not see a single example of a counter-trend. So in one sense Beck is right. In contrast, these changes are also predicted by Clark and Lipset, Pakulski and Waters, and by ourselves using rather different theoretical frameworks. On their own these trends do not provide strong support for Beck's claims that we are now 'forced' to choose our own identities. Indeed, the timing of many of the changes leads us to be somewhat sceptical of such claims, since there is no indication that the trends were given any marked impetus by the

Thatcherite reforms of the 1980s that liberalized the labour market and which might therefore have been expected to increase the compulsion on individuals to choose their own biographies.

However, there are signs that some of the changes we have identified were taking place from the very beginning of the period we have considered, which would fit in well with the accounts provided by Lipset and others. But in every case where change has happened what has been notable is the extent to which it accelerated in Britain during the era of New Labour, not least in the respect of the decline in the relationship between class identity and Labour partisanship. Rather than simply reflecting autonomous changes in the nature of society, it seems that the declining force of class identity as a normative reference group is best accounted for by political developments, and in particular by New Labour's move from 1994 onwards to a less class conscious centre ground. Class identities are forged in the crucible of political debate as well as the everyday experience of social life.

Notes

1. It should however be noted that Beck (2007) himself suggests that his thesis should be tested by an empirical investigation of the changing legal and institutional framework, which he sees as the driving force of individualization. While this would certainly be a key component of testing his theory, it still leaves open the question of the effects of such institutional changes and therefore leaves room for our kind of investigation in addition to his proposed approach.
2. Beck's emphasis on the degree to which individuals are forced to change distinguishes his theory from those writers, such as Inglehart, who consider increased individualism to be the result of changes in value orientations (Inglehart, 1977; 1997).
3. This was a move that itself may have been influenced by our own earlier work on social change and the future of the left which was published in *The Political Quarterly* and was, we were later told, discussed by the Shadow Cabinet at a key meeting; see Heath and McDonald, 1987).
4. In the case of the 1964–1997 BEs, the classes have been derived directly from full details of father's occupation and employment status. In 2005, father's class was assigned via a self-completion question designed to enable respondents to provide an informed statement of the class to which their father's occupation belonged. Since the necessary algorithm is not available for occupation coded according to the 2000 Standard Occupational Classification, for the 2005 survey, classes have been constructed from a recode of respondent's socio-economic group, which gives a good approximation.
5. A more formal treatment would be to use loglinear modelling to test the full set of relationships (see Heath et al., 2009).

6. In the case of the BESs, respondent's class has been derived from occupation and employment status. While this information was also available for respondents to the 2005 BSA, the necessary algorithm for deriving Goldthorpe class is not available for occupations coded, as were those on the 2005 BSA, according to the 2000 Standard Occupational Classification. Class has instead been constructed from a recode of respondent's socio-economic group, which itself is based on occupation and employment status and which can be used to construct a good approximation to Goldthorpe class.
7. Trends in social mobility are a contentious topic, with different data sources indicating rather different trends. For a review of the evidence, see Cabinet Office (2008). However, in understanding the patterns in Table 1.4, which uses the BES data, the analyses of social mobility that use the same data are the relevant ones.
8. We might note too that people were just as likely to be able to provide some kind of answer in 2005 as they were in 1963, contrary to what we might have anticipated if social class truly had become a 'zombie' term with little meaning for people.

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