



UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL INEQUALITY

TIM BUTLER and PAUL WATT

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Tim Butler and Paul Watt
December 2005



- Rationale
- Structure of the book

Rationale

Socio-economic inequality is massive and in many parts of the world is getting wider. According to Kerbo (2003), income inequality in the United States, the richest society on earth, has widened in every year since the 1980s. By 2000, nearly three per cent of American households were living on less than \$5,000 a year while over 13 per cent had incomes of \$100,000 and over. The net wealth for black households in 1991 was just \$4,604, whilst Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, had assets of \$54 billion in 2001. Levels of income inequality are widest in the United States out of all the major industrial nations and the gap between it and the others has itself grown since the 1970s (Kerbo, 2003). Western European countries have also experienced greater income inequality, especially Britain during the 1980s and 1990s (Hills, 1995; Walker and Walker, 1997; Flaherty et al., 2004; Hills and Stewart, 2005). In Britain the median income of the richest tenth of the population increased by over 60 per cent in real terms between 1979 and 1996/97, whereas that of the poorest tenth rose by only 11 per cent (and even fell by 13 per cent if income is measured after housing costs!) (Sefton and Sutherland, 2005: 231). Poverty also increased dramatically in Britain from 7.1 million (13 per cent of the population) in 1979 to 12.5 million people (22 per cent) in 2001/02 – poverty in this sense means below 60 per cent of median household income after housing costs (Flaherty et al., 2004: 31).

Such statistical evidence indicates the scale of inequality, but it does not by itself allow us to understand its social nature and impact. In particular, it does not show how ordinary people struggle to get by, or in some cases fail to get by, on limited means. In order to understand such social processes, other sources must be referred to. These include social scientific studies based on qualitative research methods, such as interviews or

participant observation, with those eking out a living on various combinations of welfare benefits and low-paid work (Newman, 1999; Chamberlayne et al., 2002; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Smith, 2005). Another source is a number of books by committed journalists who have temporarily taken the jobs that provide the permanent source of income for the millions of the 'working poor' in both Britain (Abrams, 2002 – see Box 1.1; Toynebee, 2003) and the United States (Ehrenreich, 2002).¹

Box 1.1 AGENCY CLEANING IN LONDON

Fran Abrams worked at three minimum wage jobs, as an agency cleaner in London, as an agency worker on the bottling line at a pickle factor in Yorkshire, and as a care assistant at an old people's home in Scotland. For her first job, she attended the Casna agency 'training session' at a hotel near central London. The session, which was due to start at 11 p.m., actually began at quarter to midnight:

'Samuel [manager] sits down and launches into a 20-minute lecture about reliability. This is obviously a key Casna Thing. More interesting, though, is the brief summary of our pay and conditions. Tonight will be an unpaid training night, though we will be reimbursed if we stay six weeks. There will also be a one-off £10 deduction for setting up a bank transfer facility. No one gets paid unless they have a bank account. If we leave without proper notice – he doesn't say how long this is – our pay will be cut to £3.60 per hour'.

Fran's first job was on the night shift at a hotel. Most of her workmates were immigrants, many of whom were also students. Fran had to clean the staff changing rooms:

'The men's are filthy. There are pools of urine all over the floor, dotted with bits of sodden toilet paper. There's obscene graffiti all over the walls of the cubicles, and several of the toilets are blocked. [...] I must empty the bins, pick up the rubbish from the floor before sweeping and mopping, then clean all the sinks, mirrors and toilets. Then I have to do the same thing all over again in the ladies'. It's incredibly hot down here, but even if it wasn't I'm sure I'd still be sweating copiously'.

After four weeks Fran left and calculated whether it's possible to live on the minimum wage in London:

'I just about manage to break even on my budget, but only after living for the best part of a week on a single bag of pasta. Then my payslip arrives, and I find I haven't been paid for most of the scheduled extra hours I spent doing offices or for my overtime. I've worked almost 119 hours, not including breaks, and I've been paid £418. ... After tax and other deductions, I take home a grand total of £363. My expenses, which consist of rent, transport ... and food, come to £474. ... No, I'm sure you can't live on these wages in London. And yet somehow, by staying with relatives or living in hopelessly overcrowded housing, by always walking or catching the bus, by juggling two jobs or even three as well as studying, tens of thousands of people in London do just that'.

Source: Abrams (2002: 11–13 and 60–1).

While there is ample statistical and experiential evidence on the nature and effects of inequality, it is also paradoxically the case that the study of social class, which is centrally concerned with describing and explaining socio-economic inequality, is no longer central to academic sociology. Indeed, some sociologists have claimed that the study of class is no longer relevant to understanding contemporary society at all, if it ever was (Pakulski and Waters, 1996). Why do they think this? The main answer is the argument that society has changed in ways that mean that the old class divisions are no longer important. Class is ultimately derived from economic distinctions bound up with the social relations of production ('you are what job you do') which dominated what Ransome (2005) calls the 'work-based society'. In the contemporary affluent 'consumption-based society' (2005), the social relations of consumption ('you are what you buy') are more significant. Another possibility is that spatial relations ('you are where you live') have grown in social importance to supplant those derived from social class (Savage et al., 2004, 2005a, 2005b).

This shift in the significance of class can be illustrated by the career of Ray Pahl, a prominent British sociologist. During the 1960s, Pahl was one of the major advocates of the utility of class as a way of describing, understanding and explaining patterns of social and spatial interaction. This was seen in his highly influential class-based critique of the newcomer/local divide in rural commuter villages (Pahl, 1965). By the late 1980s, Pahl had published a controversial paper in a major urban studies journal that amounted to a personal *volte-face*, as well as a challenge to the dominant class paradigm: 'class as a concept is ceasing to do any useful work for sociology' (1989: 710). For Pahl, the old class categories made less and less sense as a way of explaining social patterns of behaviour. His radical change of mind sparked off a series of chain reactions within the discipline of sociology (Lee and Turner, 1996).

This book broadly takes issue with the substance of Pahl's influential pronouncement, but is nevertheless very well aware that the usefulness of class for sociology is something that has to be demonstrated to those sociologists *outside* the somewhat rarefied confines of what has become known as 'class analysis' (Crompton et al., 2000; Savage, 2000; Wright, 2005). Class is simply too important to be left to the already convinced established specialists. This book is therefore aimed, at least partly, at the non-specialists within sociology who may agree with Pahl and who feel that class is no longer relevant. The book is also aimed at those more generally trying to 'place' (spatially and socially) social deprivation and inequality in a society seemingly divided between the 'have lots' and the 'have nots' yet one in which many people in the global North feel that they have grown steadily better- if not well-off.

Until the 1980s, post-war British sociology was dominated by a concern with stratification and especially class. Although the intellectual underpinnings of this concern were diverse, as we discuss below, the result was a rich seam of sociological research which placed socio-economic inequality centre-stage within the discipline. The major sub-branches within sociology demonstrated a fundamental concern with social class, as seen in the following 'classic' texts which still repay reading today:

- Family – *Family and Class in a London Suburb* by Peter Willmott and Michael Young (1960).
- Education – *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* by Paul Willis (1977).
- Employment (or what used to be called ‘industrial sociology’) – *Working for Ford* by Huw Beynon (1984, first published in 1973).

As well as making a serious contribution towards a sociological understanding of the structures and processes governing social inequality, these kinds of books were often written in a highly readable style which could not only grab the imagination of the average sociology undergraduate but could even appeal to the lay reader.

Five major developments have occurred within the social sciences during the last 30 years that have had a profound impact on academic sociology in relation to the analysis of social inequality.

- The introduction of new theoretical approaches and perspectives, notably feminism, poststructuralism and postmodernism, as well as the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu.
- The ‘cultural turn’ has led away from understanding social inequality through economics and politics towards symbolic representations of cultural difference (Devine and Savage, 2005), as exemplified by the influential and expanding field of cultural studies (Munt, 2000).
- Class is no longer ‘king’ – there has been a progressive expansion of the domain of inequality to incorporate elements previously marginalized by a monolithic class paradigm. Gender, ethnicity, age and their associated identities have steadily moved up the sociological agenda with the consequence that class has become just one among several sources of inequality (Bradley, 1996).
- A renewed interest in space and place, topics traditionally associated with the discipline of geography. This has led to a certain rapprochement between sociologists and human geographers which has been particularly fruitful in the field of urban studies (Savage et al., 2003).
- Globalization – however real or imagined its impacts – has undermined the perceived national experience of systems of class inequality and so led to its increasing marginalization in sociological discourses.

As a result of these developments, class no longer acts as *the* bridge across the various sub-specialisms within the discipline of sociology. Instead, the study of social class, or class analysis, has effectively become a sub-specialism in itself. This academic specialization and division of labour can be regarded as an inevitable result of disciplinary expansion with far more sociology departments and sociologists in existence now in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s. However, we also think that it can lead in directions, both theoretical and methodological, which ironically mean that the study of inequality becomes removed from providing a clear connection between the ‘private troubles’ and ‘public issues’ which constitutes what C. Wright Mills (1970) called ‘the sociological imagination’. Having taught stratification to sociology undergraduates for several years, many of whom have come from working-class, poor and otherwise

disadvantaged backgrounds, we are aware that some of the established approaches and debates in the field of class analysis have not connected up with their own 'private' worldviews and experiences, for example, as in debates over the 'best' occupational class scheme to use; see below.²

Our aim in this book is to offer a path through some of the debates and issues that are pertinent to the analysis of social inequality, especially class inequality. We aim to do so in an accessible manner that stimulates students' sociological imaginations and prompts them to question how the study of inequality can link up private troubles (including their own) with public issues. This book makes no apology for being centrally concerned with social class, but in a manner which does not ignore 'other' aspects of inequality, for example ethnicity, age and gender. Careful readers will have spotted that we referred above to covering only 'some' of the issues and debates relevant to class analysis. We are not claiming to be comprehensive and it is therefore important to indicate the boundaries and biases of the book.

Traditionally, sociology was taught as a series of trinities – first between social theory, social structure and methods, and second within theory between Marx, Weber and Durkheim. The third trinity was the 'holy grail' of sociological analysis – finding the synthesis between structure and action. We believe that these trinities are no longer as apposite as they once were, given the way that a series of writers, notably Pierre Bourdieu (see Chapter 8), have developed a sociological approach which transgresses many, if not all, of these boundaries borrowing (at least in the UK) from a number of traditions. This has contributed towards a cessation in the traditional divisions within sociology and to a more synthetic approach which has also seen a blurring of boundaries with cognate disciplines and fields, notably human geography, cultural studies and social policy. Thus, although we make reference to social theory and theoretical debates, we do not claim to offer either a particular theoretical approach or a comprehensive theoretical overview of the terrain of class analysis. Examples of the former include the neo-Marxism of Erik Olin Wright (1997), whilst examples of the latter include Crompton (1998), Savage (2000) and most recently Wright (2005); readers are encouraged to refer to these sources.

In relation to methodology, we are not centrally concerned with the question of exactly how one operationalizes the concept of social class in survey research, typically via the employment of occupational schemes which are often hierarchically arranged (Duke and Edgell, 1987). Crompton (1998: 55) has referred to the 'employment aggregate approach' to class analysis which uses occupation as the best indicator of class in survey-based research and aims to find out what impact the class scheme has on a range of dependent variables, for example rates of mortality or ill health (Townsend et al., 1988). The official Registrar General's (RG) social class scheme, which groups a large number of occupations into a smaller number of hierarchically organized classes, has historically been the major way that this employment aggregate approach has been conducted in Britain, not least by government agencies (Reid, 1998; see Table 1.1 below).³ As Reid demonstrates, occupationally based class schemes, like the RG's, can then be correlated with a large number of other variables, such as rates of illness or the proportion of young people going to university, and this allows the measurement of

Table 1.1 Registrar General's Social Class scheme

Social Class	Occupations	Examples
I	Professional	Solicitor, doctor
II	Managerial and technical	Manager, nurse
IIIN	Skilled non-manual	Secretary, receptionist
IIIM	Skilled manual	Electrician, hairdresser
IV	Partly skilled	Caretaker, hospital porter
V	Unskilled	Cleaner, labourer

Source: adapted from OPCS (1991:12)

statistical correlations between occupational class and differences in health, education, income, etc. Research on health inequalities has shown that mortality rates follow a 'class gradient'; in other words that the percentages of the population dying and being ill are highest among social class V (unskilled occupations) and they decrease as one moves 'up' the class scheme to their lowest level in class I (professionals) (Townsend et al., 1988).

Despite its utility in correlating with and predicting life chances, such as mortality rates or chances of attending university, the RG class scheme has been subject to various criticisms including its uncertain theoretical basis (Rose and O'Reilly, 1997; Crompton, 1998). Such criticisms have meant that the RG scheme was replaced from 2001 by an alternative more complex scheme, the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC); see Rose and O'Reilly (1997) for a rationale and discussion of the new scheme. The eight-fold NS-SEC is effectively a modified version of the neo-Weberian class scheme originally devised by John Goldthorpe (1980) to measure social mobility in Britain (see also Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). Table 1.2 shows the NS-SEC and Goldthorpe equivalents.

As Breen (2005) has pointed out, there has been a slight shift in the conceptual principles underpinning the Goldthorpe class scheme. Initially it was based on clustering occupations according to their market situation and work situation along Weberian lines (Goldthorpe, 1980). Market situation refers not only to the range of immediate rewards that accrue to an occupation, for example salary/wage levels, occupational pension schemes and access to perks such as company cars, but also 'prospective rewards' such as promotion opportunities and incremental salary increases. Work situation refers to the occupation's location within a system of authority and control and the degree of autonomy that people within that occupation have in undertaking their work tasks. The principles underlying the Goldthorpe scheme later shifted to employment relations, notably whether employment is regulated by a 'labour contract' as in the case of the working class, or a 'service relationship' as in the case of the service class (Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). Those in the service class (salaried managers and professionals) are advantaged relative to both the intermediate and working classes by possessing higher rewards, including 'prospective rewards' in the form of career opportunities, as well as greater levels of authority and autonomy within organizational hierarchies.

Table 1.2 National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification and equivalent Goldthorpe class names

NS-SEC classes	Goldthorpe class names
1 Higher managerial and professional occupations	Service
2 Lower managerial and professional occupations	Service
3 Intermediate occupations	Intermediate
4 Small employers and own account workers	Intermediate
5 Lower supervisory and technical occupations	Intermediate
6 Semi-routine occupations	Working
7 Routine occupations	Working
8 Never worked and long-term unemployed	–

Sources: adapted from: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/methods-quality/ns_sec/default.asp (23 March 2005), and Roberts, 2001: 25.

The employment aggregate approach has involved some of the most protracted debates within sociology, for example between neo-Marxists and neo-Weberians (Marshall et al., 1988; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993; Wright, 1997), as well as the acrimonious ‘women and class’ debate over the role of female employment and whether the household or individual constitutes the best ‘unit’ for measuring occupational class (H Roberts, 1993). Summaries of these debates and alternative class schemes are available elsewhere (Crompton, 1998; Roberts, 2001; Bottero, 2005) and again interested readers are referred to these (see Further reading at the end of this chapter).

Crompton (1998: 122) has suggested that a fruitful methodological alternative to the employment aggregate approach in class analysis is the case study ‘which views the social unit (the neighbourhood, the trade union, the workgroup, the political party) as a whole’. Hence the emphasis moves away from the multivariate analysis of large survey data sets based upon occupational clusters, towards an understanding of the processes of class formation whereby the dynamics of action and consciousness are explored within specific contexts of unequal rewards and life chances. The case-study approach also highlights the intersection of class with ‘other’ axes of inequality:

Such studies invariably reveal the complexities of group formation, and in particular, the interpenetration of the ‘economic’ with the social or cultural. Thus they have focused not only on ‘class’ factors – that is, economic power as reflected in production and market relationships – but also on ascriptive (status) factors associated with gender, race and age, as well as cultural and normative assumptions, and the influence of contextual factors such as locality and community. (1998: 203–4)

Although case studies are often thought to be synonymous with qualitative data, they can also embrace quantitative data, and Crompton points to the use of the latter in the ‘critical case study’ of affluent workers in Luton by Goldthorpe et al. (1969), discussed in Chapter 3. In this book, we make frequent use of case studies to illuminate

the dynamic nature of class processes and also the complexities of contemporary class relations. Many of these case studies are furthermore attentive to the spatial context of social action and again this is something that we wish to emphasize.

Our main source of reference for much of the material in this book is Britain. Nevertheless, where appropriate, we discuss material drawn from North American and European societies in many chapters. In this manner, we are trying to engage with the increasingly globalized nature of social inequality. Our approach is to indicate something of the broad contours of class as they apply across the Western world, but within the context of globalization which means that similar processes of inequality-generating mechanisms are taking place. This is not to say that these processes are having the same effect everywhere; they don't. Considerable differences arise in each nation-state context, especially in relation to the circumstances of those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy partially at least as a consequence of differences between 'welfare regimes', as we discuss in Chapter 6.

Finally, as mentioned above, our primary focus in this book is with socio-economic or class inequalities. In this sense we agree with Harriet Bradley (1996) in her book *Fragmented Identities* who suggests that class is still extremely important, not least because of the unquestionable 'social fact' that contemporary societies are massively unequal in material terms, as we highlighted above. To abandon 'class' altogether in the face of overwhelming evidence for the growth of socio-economic inequalities seems sociologically perverse. In her book, Bradley offers a 'synthetic approach' to class analysis that we are sympathetic to, even if it ultimately raises as many questions as it solves (Walby, 1992; Crompton, 1998). Bradley concedes that any singular 'return to class' is weakened by its reliance on a form of 'grand narrative', associated with Marxism, and that other forms of inequality, such as gender, ethnicity and age, have their own dynamics which cannot be reduced to class. Instead, she suggests that one potential way forward for class analysis is to understand the ways in which the various dynamics of inequality intersect and interweave. In other words, class analysis can only proceed by abandoning its hegemonic pretensions and embracing the multi-dimensional nature of social inequality. Whilst we broadly endorse this position, we also think that achieving the comprehensiveness that Bradley advocates is beyond a text like ours. Therefore, while we make reference to 'other' aspects of inequality, notably ethnicity, gender and – to a lesser extent – age, we accept that specialists in these areas will undoubtedly find our book deficient.

Structure of the book

There are two main themes to this book. Firstly, that the social world has changed immensely over the last 50 years and that the 1970s/1980s marked a tipping point between an old industrial society whose origins lay in the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution and a new one which has arisen out of a post-industrial information led economy. The restructuring from one to another, a process which is far

from complete in 2006, is the subject matter of contemporary sociology and this book. The second main theme is that what were once mainly social processes, which were associated with particular places, are now ones which are truly socio-spatial in which place cannot simply be 'read off' from changes that were essentially social in origin. This reflects in the structure of the book which is organized roughly according to these two themes which, of course, are incomplete, inchoate and interbred but nevertheless, we argue, are at the heart of the changing object of sociological study over the last half century.

Chapter 2 goes on to examine two main intellectual frameworks, postmodernity and globalization, that have challenged many of the central claims of class analysis. Chapter 3 focuses on the 'collar line' in differentiating classes, paying attention in particular to the changing relevance of occupation and how this was manifested in the industrial city and the slow move towards the suburbs in the context of affluence. Chapter 4 develops this argument by focusing on how scholars working in Marxist and Weberian traditions attempted to come to terms with these intra-class divisions against the background of increasing social and economic crisis in the 1970s and how the inner city developed as a metaphor for the nature of the changes taking place. In essence we argue, both groups had to throw away the sociological rulebook in order to comprehend the restructuring of national class systems and space economies.

In Chapter 5 we examine the consequences of this in terms of the new and emerging spatial and social divisions: the emergence of global cities, gentrification of the inner city and – controversially – of an urban underclass. Chapter 6 focuses on the notion that, despite increased aggregate affluence, advanced capitalist societies during the last 30 years have increasingly generated high and sustained levels of poverty and also what has come to be termed 'social exclusion'. We discuss these issues in relation to debates around how welfare states are organized in Western societies. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union and East European state socialist societies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the comparative analysis of stratification in advanced societies tended to focus upon differences between such 'second world' societies and 'first world' Western capitalist societies (Giddens, 1973; Hamilton and Hirszowicz, 1993). Since the demise of the state socialist societies there has been renewed interest in the differences between Western capitalist societies (Crow, 1997). Chapter 7 examines processes of class formation among post-industrial service workers, examining the new work created by this restructuring as well as those who undertake these jobs.

Finally, in Chapter 8 we pull these debates together to suggest that an emerging sociology of stratification drawing heavily, yet eclectically, from the work of Pierre Bourdieu and others, based in a broad range of empirical methodologies, is beginning to paint a very different sociological picture from that of the sociological orthodoxies of the past half century. It is one which recognizes the place (literally) of choice and belonging in the context of new economic and occupational divisions in which sociological subjects play a very active role in painting the picture of their surrounding society.

Further reading

Crompton (1998) remains probably the best single overview of the terrain of class analysis. Wright (2005) provides an outline of the theoretical foundations to six major perspectives on class, including Wright's own neo-Marxism, Goldthorpe's neo-Weberian approach, and Bourdieu. Wright (1997) is a somewhat neglected, but extremely rich comparative neo-Marxist study of class structure and consciousness. Bradley (1996) offers an exceptionally clear overview of the postmodernist challenge to the analysis of social inequality across the four dimensions of class, gender, race/ethnicity and age. Gibson-Graham et al. (2000) present an eclectic collection of stimulating essays that draw upon poststructural theory and Marxism. Bottero (2005) is an excellent account of the debates over class that largely complements our own, but coming at it very much from the perspective of the 'Cambridge School'; she places more emphasis than we have on issues of gender, sexuality and arguably ethnicity, but says less about issues of place and space. Marshall et al. (1988) is based on a large-scale survey of the British class structure in the 'employment aggregate' tradition. Devine (1997) is a detailed comparison of class stratification between the United States and Britain.

The history and operationalization of the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) can be found at http://www.statistics.gov.uk/methods_quality/ns_sec/default.asp



Modernity, Postmodernity and Globalization

- Introduction: the end of certainty
- The Enlightenment ‘project’, modernity and postmodernity
- Globalization
- Models of globalization
- Globalization and migration
- Conclusion

Introduction: the end of certainty

In this chapter, we focus on two linked discussions that, over the past quarter of a century, have unsettled the ways that we had come to understand the nature of social stratification in advanced industrial nations. The discussions are those about the nature of postmodernity and of globalization, terms that have been highly contested both from within and outside the academic sociological community. What was once clearly in the academic domain of sociology – the nature of social stratification – has become generalized across the broad fields of the humanities and social sciences as well as a more public intellectual milieu.

We begin the chapter by attempting to unravel what is meant by ‘postmodern’ through a discussion of the rise and fall of the concept of ‘modernity’ whose origins we trace back to the Enlightenment. The development of sociology, and particularly the sociology of social stratification and industrial society, is similarly traced back to the Enlightenment. We suggest that it was a combination of Enlightenment philosophy and the development of capitalist modernity that gave rise to the particular certainties and structural imperatives that characterized sociological thinking for much of the twentieth century. In particular, classes were seen as the natural flora and fauna of this habitat and they determined the broad patterns of social behaviour. The implosion of this relatively stable socio-economic environment in the late 1970s and early

1980s has given rise to a plethora of ways of thinking about how we understand and explain the relationship between individuals and their social settings. These are all characterized by a far greater degree of disconnectedness between social structure and individual behaviour and a notable victim of this has been the pre-eminent status enjoyed by social class and the associated concerns about socio-economic inequality. Whilst no consensus has emerged, it is clear that sociology now pays far greater attention to 'other' aspects of social inequality and difference, notably gender, ethnicity and age (Bradley, 1996), and the role played by cultural factors as seen in the 'cultural turn' (Devine and Savage, 2005). By way of illustration, it can be argued that the politics of class identification have been replaced by a politics in which constructions of identity are now far more complex than the relatively simple formulations of even 30 years ago (Devine et al., 2005; Ransome, 2005). We conclude our discussion about postmodernity by identifying how 'it' was something that emerged from the crisis of modernity.

The second great unsettling movement in recent decades also emerged from the crisis of the post-war socio-economic settlement that had begun to develop in the late 1970s. This has come to be known as globalization, a concept whose origins lay in the nature of the particular economic crisis of the period and whose resolution – 'automate, emigrate or evaporate' as Thrift (1988: 9) put it – called into question the nature of the national economy, the nation state and the settled notions of class structure. Despite the great Empires (notably those of, first, the United Kingdom and then the United States) that had characterized the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nation states and national cultures had acted as the main economic, cultural and social containers for Enlightenment thinking and capitalist modernity (Hardt and Negri, 2000). Quite how far this has been broken down by the apparent rise of globalization is unclear.⁴ Despite record flows of money, culture, information and populations across national borders and the rise of the internet, satellite broadcasting, transnational corporations and the European Union, there has been a sustained disagreement about the significance of the nature and extent of these changes. Even those who have argued most strongly for the rise of a more global set of political and economic relations have conceded that there has also been an increased sense of localism in many spheres of social, political and cultural life. It is, however, clear we can no longer rely on a sociology that operates within a largely *national* concept of a 'society', as happened for much of the twentieth century – in which statements about the '*British* working class' went largely unchallenged (Urry, 2000).

The generations that were born in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and the subsequent decade (the baby boomers) have witnessed probably far greater changes in the technological and social organization of their lives than any generation since the Industrial Revolution transformed the household economy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This has happened across the social spectrum, encompassing the winners as well as the losers in the massive changes that have taken place.

Undoubtedly, across the globe, there have been more losers than winners in the restructuring of the last quarter century but, sometimes, we can gain a better insight

of general processes by studying those who are not the 'usual suspects'. Studying social class simply from the perspective of the working class, for example, has, it has been argued, blinded many to its continuing possibilities (Savage, 1995). Moreover, there is much to be learned from the intensive, small-scale qualitative study in understanding how social processes work. We are currently witnessing another iteration of capitalism and the ways in which it works through the lives of individuals whether they be technology consultants or 'nickel and dimed' service workers (Sennett, 1998; Ehrenreich, 2002; Toynbee, 2003). All of these people, not just the advantaged, are reflexive beings who are aware of how the processes of socio-economic restructuring – a term unheard of until 20 years ago – have become embodied in their lives yet feel, for the most part, largely powerless to do anything about it.⁵

Our aim in this chapter is to consider *postmodernity* and *globalization* as the two overarching, over-egged yet over-simplified terms that frame much contemporary discussion about the relationship between people and their place in the social structure. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey (1989) introduces the notion of 'time-space compression' (see Box 2.1) which provided one of the first specific links between the changes that were happening at the level of the economic system and that of cultural representation. His approach informs much of the remainder of this chapter. Harvey's book makes a powerful critique of the concept of postmodernism whilst locating its causes and consequences in more conventional Marxist political economy.

Box 2.1 TIME-SPACE COMPRESSION

Harvey (1989) argues that postmodernism is a cultural construct of the flexible accumulation of the economy, or what others have called globalization. To make his argument Harvey discusses the phenomena of what he calls 'time-space compression'. Harvey claims that ever since the increased mobility and internationalization of capital in the early 1970s, society has undergone another round of 'time-space compression' which is the likely root of the postmodern condition. According to Harvey, 'the general effect is for capitalist modernization to be very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, social life' (1989: 230). The goal of this speed-up is to accelerate 'the turnover time of capital' which is composed of the 'time of production together with the time of circulation of exchange' (1989: 229). In this process, the rapidity of time annihilates the barriers of space. As Harvey puts it, 'innovations dedicated to the removal of spatial barriers ... have been of immense significance in the history of capitalism, turning that history into a very geographical affair – the railroad and the telegraph, the automobile, radio and telephone, the jet aircraft and television, and the recent telecommunications revolution are cases in point' (1989: 232). All these modernizations have served to make the world a smaller place, and have in the last quarter of the twentieth century connected disparate markets together in the creation of a world market with global producers and global consumers. For example, the world from 1500 to 1960 got 70 times smaller as the average speed in 1500 of horse-drawn carriages or boats was 10 mph versus planes in 1960 which could fly 700 mph. The