

2 | Class Mobility in Absolute Terms: The End of the Golden Age

In this chapter we focus on social class mobility as considered in *absolute* as opposed to *relative* terms. This is a quite crucial distinction, and a great deal of the confusion in discussion of social mobility in political and policy circles to which we referred in the Introduction arises from its neglect or misunderstanding. We must therefore try to make the distinction clear and to bring out its significance, although we may be able to achieve this fully only as the book proceeds.

Absolute class mobility can in itself be readily understood. It refers simply to the proportions of individuals moving between different class positions, and, as will be seen, it can be adequately measured simply as percentages in one form or another. What is, however, important to recognise is that absolute rates are conditioned by two different, and essentially independent, factors: first, by the structure, and changes in the structure, of the class positions between which mobility occurs; and, second, by relative rates of class mobility. In other words, the class structure and relative rates together imply absolute rates:

class structure + relative rates => absolute rates

How relative rates are conceptualised and measured is a more difficult matter, and will be explained in some detail in the next chapter. For the moment, it may be sufficient to think of relative rates as ones that *compare the chances* of individuals of different class origins being found in different class destinations, and that thus reflect social processes which, as they operate within the class structure, generate the absolute rates that are actually observed. The class structure sets the context of class mobility; relative rates determine how, within this context, absolute rates are realised.

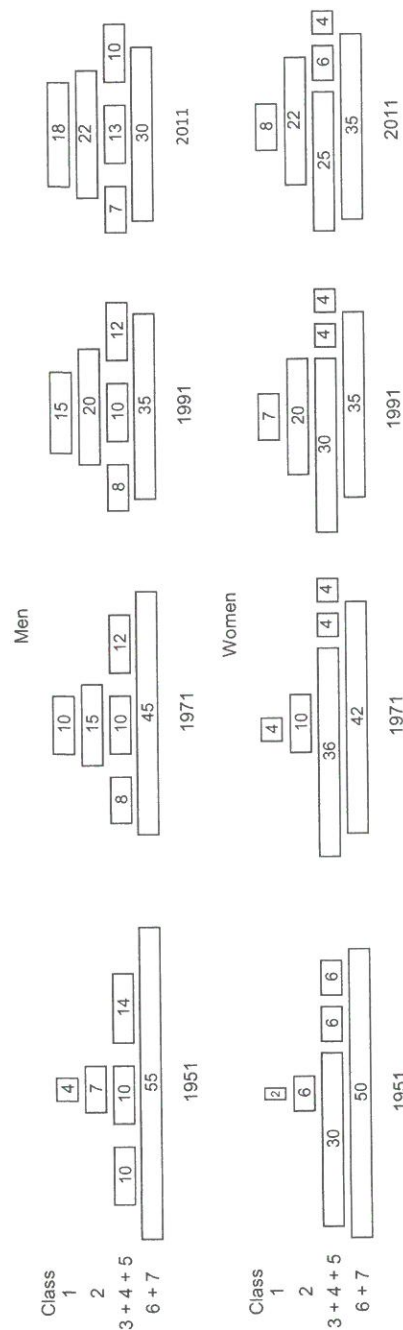
In what follows we will start our analyses of the level, pattern and trend of absolute rates by tracing the development of the class structure over the historical period of interest to us. But since relative rates are also involved, we will reach a point at which, in order to sustain the

argument that we seek to develop regarding absolute rates, we will need to anticipate one of our main findings on relative rates – asking readers to take this finding on trust until we can set out in detail how we arrive at it.

In establishing the development of the class structure, we would ideally wish to do this on the basis of NS-SEC, which, as we have stated, is the classification on which we will chiefly rely in our analyses of mobility. However, the historical sources on which we have to draw are official, primarily Census, statistics, and NS-SEC came into operation in official statistics only in 2001. Before then a variety of other social classifications were in use which, while also being based, like NS-SEC, primarily on employment status and occupation, cannot be straightforwardly mapped on to NS-SEC. To gain some idea of the way in which the British class structure has changed over the last half-century or more, we have therefore to try as far as possible to harmonise, in relation to NS-SEC, data deriving from a range of sources that are not entirely comparable. The results we arrive at, as displayed in Figure 2.1, have then to be regarded as no more than approximate at a detailed level. Nonetheless, the overall picture that is provided is one that can be taken as reliable enough for our purposes.

What is shown in Figure 2.1, in graphical form, are our best estimates of how the class distributions of economically active men and women would have appeared, according to a somewhat collapsed version of NS-SEC, at the census years of 1951, 1971, 1991 and 2011.

In the case of men, it can be seen that the shapes of the distributions steadily change from a clearly pyramidal form in 1951 to a more rectangular one in 2011. In 1951 the wage-earning working class, as represented by NS-SEC Classes 6 and 7, was predominant, accounting for well over half the active male population. In contrast, the managerial and professional salariat, as represented by Classes 1 and 2, accounted for little more than a tenth. But over the period covered the working class contracts and the salariat expands, and especially rapidly between 1951 and 1991. Thus, by 2011 the working class is reduced to less than a third of the active male population while the salariat comprises around two-fifths. The three intermediate classes, NS-SEC Classes 3, 4 and 5, remain more stable in size, although some slight decline is indicated in the proportion of men in Class 3, that of employees in ancillary professional and administrative occupations.



Sources: Census and Labour Force Surveys: Routh (1981, 1987); Gallie (2000)

Figure 2.1 Class distributions (%) of economically active population, 1951-2011

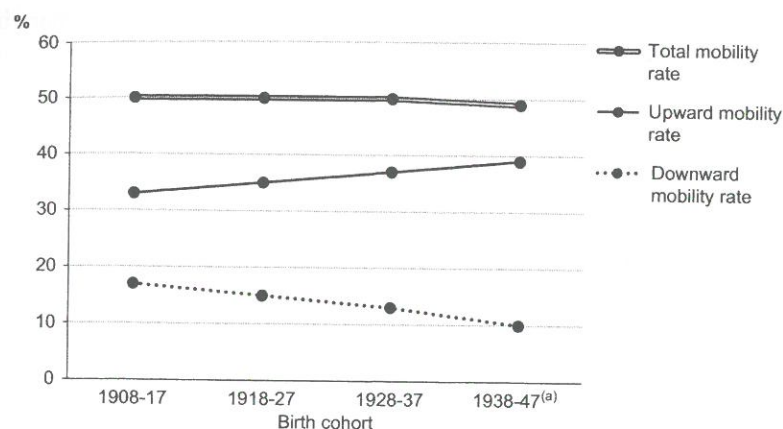
In the case of women, the distributions change for the most part in the same way as with men, even if somewhat more slowly, and in particular the increase in the proportion in the higher-level managerial and professional positions of NS-SEC Class 1 is less marked. The one major difference from men comes with NS-SEC Class 3 which between 1951 and 1971 expanded so as to account for over a third of the active female population but then contracted so as to account for only a quarter by 2011 – a reflection chiefly of the rise and fall of the office secretary and typist.

A class structure developing on the lines shown in Figure 2.1 can in fact be regarded as a quite characteristic feature of societies making the transition from industrialism to postindustrialism – a transition driven by technological advance and rising productivity, the sectoral shift from extractive and manufacturing industries to services, and the growth of governmental and corporate administrative hierarchies. In the British case, the changes in question might, however, be seen as somewhat accentuated – as much by political as economic influences – in two respects: first, as regards the expansion of the managerial and professional salariat by the creation and development of the welfare state in the postwar decades; and, second, as regards the decline of the working class, by the speed and extent of the deindustrialisation of the 1980s and 1990s.¹

It is, then, in this structural context that we have to situate the analyses that follow in this chapter. As will become apparent, in understanding levels, patterns and trends of absolute intergenerational class mobility, *it is the changing shape of the class structure that is all-important.*

In order to bring out this point most clearly, we have in fact to go back to a period before that covered by the birth cohort studies which, as we have indicated, provide the basis for most of the research that we will discuss. This earlier period is covered by the Nuffield mobility

¹ It has been widely argued that in postindustrial societies the class structure tends to be 'hollowed out', with declining numbers being found in classes intermediate between the managerial and professional salariat and the lower stratum of the wage-earning working class. If the distributions of men and women shown in Figure 2.1 are taken together, support for this argument can in fact be seen. It is, however, at the same time important to note that often in this regard attention has centred on employees, and there has been a neglect of the self-employed and small employers whose numbers have of late tended generally to increase (see Arum and Müller eds., 2004).



Note

(a) Rate adjusted to allow for young age in 1972 – i.e. between age 25 and 34 – on the basis of life-course changes in the class positions of men in the 1928–37 cohort

Source: Goldthorpe (1980/1987)

Figure 2.2 Total mobility rates and upward and downward components, men born 1908–1947, interviewed in 1972

study of 1972 that was referred to in the Introduction, and Figure 2.2 is derived from results obtained in this study. What Figure 2.2 shows is the *total mobility rate*, and its upward and downward components, for four cohorts, or, to be more precise, for four ‘quasi-cohorts’, or age groups, of men who were born in the ten-year periods indicated.² The total mobility rate, in intergenerational perspective, is simply the proportion – percentage – of individuals who, at some age or, as here, at some time are found in a different class to that in which they originated. In the Nuffield study class origins were determined by the class of

² When with a mobility survey of cross-sectional design, as in the case of the Nuffield study, the aim is to investigate changes in mobility, it is common practice to divide up the sample into individuals born in successive periods and to treat these groupings as if they were birth cohorts. The limitation of this practice is that at the time of the survey, when respondents’ class positions are established, those in a series of such ‘quasi-cohorts’ will be of differing age. Care has then to be taken (see note to Figure 2.2) with younger persons, since class position can often change in the early stages of working life. Only around the late 30s does the probability of changes in employment that imply changes in class position tend to fall away (see Bukodi and Goldthorpe, 2009, 2011a). With data relating to the life courses of true birth cohorts, the possibility arises – which we consistently exploit – of comparing members of successive cohorts *at the same age*.

men’s fathers, or other ‘family head’, during their early adolescence. In order to maintain sufficiently large numbers in the analyses underlying Figure 2.2, only three, hierarchically ordered, classes are distinguished, broadly corresponding to NS-SEC Classes 1 and 2, the managerial and professional salariat, Classes 3, 4 and 5, the ‘intermediate’ classes, and Classes 6 and 7, the wage-earning working class. It is then by reference to these three ordered classes that the upward and downward components of the total mobility rate are calculated.

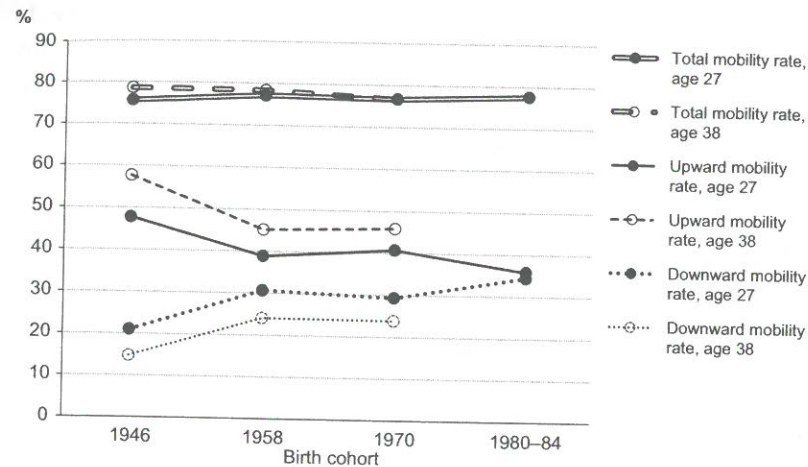
There are two main points that should be noted from Figure 2.2. First, the total mobility rate remains remarkably constant across the four cohorts at close to 50 per cent: that is to say, half the men in each cohort alike were, when interviewed in 1972, found in a different class from that in which they originated. Second, though, the upward and downward components of the total mobility rate show clear trends, the upward mobility component steadily rising across the cohorts and the downward mobility component falling. Thus, among men born 1908–17 around a third had experienced upward mobility – that is, from working-class origins to intermediate classes or to the professional and managerial salariat or from intermediate class origins to the salariat – and around a sixth had experienced mobility in the reverse direction. But among men born 1938–47 the proportion who were upwardly mobile rises to two-fifths and the proportion who were downwardly mobile falls to only a tenth.

Against the background of these earlier findings we may now consider comparable results relating to the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that come from our own analyses: that is, from analyses based on the datasets of the three cohort studies referred to in the Introduction that cover men and women born in 1946, 1958 and 1970, but supplemented for present purposes by data for a further cohort of men and women born 1980–4 that we have derived from the UK Household Longitudinal Study.³

Figure 2.3 shows total mobility rates and their upward and downward components for men in these four cohorts. Cohort members’ class origins are determined in the same way as in Figure 2.2.⁴

³ For a full account of the research drawn on in the text, see Bukodi et al. (2015) and for further commentary Goldthorpe (2016).

⁴ With the 1958 and 1970 cohorts it is possible to investigate the effects of taking the mother’s class also into account, in various ways, in determining cohort members’ class origins. Results we obtain indicate that this in fact makes rather



Source: Bukodi et al. (2015)

Figure 2.3 Total mobility rate and upward and downward components, men born in 1946, 1958 and 1970 at ages 27 and 38, and born 1980–4 at age 27

However, their own class positions are taken not at a particular time but rather at two ages – namely, at around age 27 and at age 38. This is so because the age range 24–30 is the oldest for which we have information on the class positions of members of the 1980–4 cohort, and 38 is the oldest age at which we have information on the class positions of members of the 1970 cohort. One further difference is that in Figure 2.3 mobility is treated according to the standard seven-class version of NS-SEC, as shown in Table 1.1. However, since, as was earlier noted, Classes 3, 4 and 5 are not regarded as ordered, mobility between these classes is regarded as ‘horizontal’ and, although included in the total rate, is not itself shown in the figure. The upward and downward components of the total rate refer to mobility across the five hierarchical divisions of NS-SEC as indicated by the dashed lines in Table 1.1.

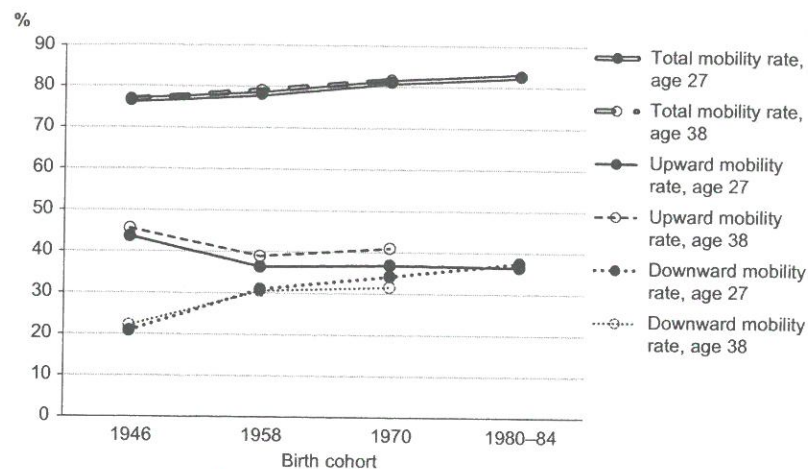
It may be observed that in Figure 2.3 the total mobility rate, at around 80 per cent, appears higher than in Figure 2.2. But this is only to be expected since in using NS-SEC we create more classes – seven rather than just three – between which mobility can occur. Thus, no

little difference to estimates of the overall strength and pattern of the association between origins and destinations.

real change in total mobility need be supposed. What is more important to note is that, whether we consider men at around age 27 or at age 38, the total mobility rate is, again as in Figure 2.2, essentially stable across the cohorts. However, the really striking feature of Figure 2.3, when set in comparison with Figure 2.2, is the differences that are shown up in the trends in the upward and downward components of the total rate. *These are now the reverse of those that were previously seen.* It is the downward component that is increasing and the upward component that is decreasing. Thus, while men in the 1946 birth cohort were at age 27 about twice as likely, and at age 38 almost three times more likely, to have experienced upward rather than downward mobility, these differences narrow considerably in later cohorts. And indeed for men in the 1980–4 cohort at around age 27 the chances of having been upwardly or downwardly mobile are more or less equal.⁵ It is true that some improvement in the situation of these men could be expected by the time they reach age 38, since a tendency exists for upward class mobility to prevail over downward in the course of earlier working life, and this is indeed apparent from Figure 2.3 itself in that the upward mobility rate is always higher and the downward mobility rate lower at age 38 than at age 27. Nonetheless, the big picture that emerges from the figure would seem clear enough. During the later twentieth century and into the twenty-first century the experience of upward mobility has become less frequent in men’s lives and that of downward mobility more frequent.

In Figure 2.4 we show comparable results for women. A number of differences with our findings for men can be seen, although none is of great magnitude. First, the total mobility rate for women tends to increase somewhat across the cohorts, from a little under to a little over 80 per cent – for reasons that will emerge in the following chapter. Second, as regards the upward and downward components of the total rate, the differences that appear between the graphs for women at age 27 and at age 38 are less than with men, indicating that the tendency

⁵ The fact that men in the 1958 cohort appear as falling ‘below trend’ as regards decreasing upward mobility and ‘above trend’ as regards increasing downward mobility can be explained by the adverse effects on the working lives of these men of the highly unfavourable labour market conditions prevailing in the early 1980s: i.e. at the time of, or shortly after, their entry into employment. See further Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011a).



Source: Bukodi et al. (2015)

Figure 2.4 Total mobility rate and upward and downward components, women born in 1946, 1958 and 1970 at ages 27 and 38, and born 1980–4 at age 27

for upward mobility to be more common than downward during earlier working life is less marked for women. Third, the decline in upward mobility between the 1946 and 1958 cohorts levels out across both the 1970 and the 1980–4 cohorts rather than continuing between these cohorts, as it does with men. But, fourth, the rise in downward mobility, at least when women's class positions are taken at age 38, is more continuous than with men. It thus turns out that the overall outcome for women is essentially the same as for men: across the four birth cohorts, women's experience of upward mobility becomes less frequent and that of downward mobility more frequent, and to much the same extent as with men.⁶

⁶ Indications that the trends in the upward and downward components of total mobility among men shown in Figure 2.2 had at all events levelled out, if not actually reversed, can be found in earlier research based on cross-sectional surveys (e.g. Mills and Payne, 1989; Goldthorpe and Mills, 2004, 2008; Paterson and Ianelli, 2007) and also on the Office of National Statistics Longitudinal Study dataset, which comprises a 1 per cent sample of linked census records from 1971 (Buscha and Sturgis, 2017). In the case of women, earlier work appears less often to have anticipated the reversal in trends in upward and downward mobility that our inclusion of relatively recent birth cohorts serves to bring out.

How, then, is this reversal of trends in the upward and downward components of the total mobility rate to be explained? The middle decades of the twentieth century, during which social ascent so clearly predominated over social descent, have been described, with the benefit of hindsight, as the golden age of social mobility in Britain. Why, we have to ask, has this golden age come to an end?

The key to the answer lies in Figure 2.1. The expansion of the managerial and professional salariat and the contraction of the working class that is shown in this figure carry an important implication. They mean that in the second half of the twentieth century, *the distribution of the class origins* of men and women also began to change substantially. Steadily more started out in life from relatively advantaged class positions and fewer from relatively disadvantaged positions. For example, between the 1946 and 1980–4 cohorts the proportion of men and women originating in Classes 1 and 2 tripled, from 13 to 39 per cent, while the proportion originating in Classes 6 and 7 halved, from 54 to 26 per cent. In other words, across our birth cohorts the number of individuals 'at risk' of being downwardly mobile in terms of social class, as we would treat it, steadily increases and the number 'at risk' of – or, that is, having the possibility of – being upwardly mobile steadily decreases. And we can in fact say that it is this change in itself that almost entirely accounts for the increasing component of downward mobility in the total mobility rate and the decreasing component of upward mobility.⁷

It is in order to justify this claim that, as we forewarned at the start of the chapter, we have to anticipate one of our principal findings regarding relative rates of class mobility. This is that across our birth cohorts relative rates – with one rather special exception – *remain constant or at most merely fluctuate in a trendless fashion*. In the present context, all that needs to be understood is that, in being

⁷ Given that upward and downward mobility are determined according to the fivefold hierarchical division of NS-SEC, it is obviously the case that it is not only mobility from Class 1 or 2 origins to lower classes that contributes to downward mobility, nor mobility from Class 6 or 7 origins to higher classes that contributes to upward mobility. But it is in fact mobility of these kinds that preponderantly lies behind the changes in the upward and downward components of the total mobility rate we have described.

themselves essentially *unchanging*, relative rates can contribute little to the changes in absolute rates that we have demonstrated. It then follows that in accounting for the contrast that is revealed between Figure 2.2, on the one hand, and Figures 2.3 and 2.4, on the other, *it is the evolving class structure that must be seen as the crucial driving force*. And the further implication is that the structural change that underlay the golden age – the rapid growth of the salariat, creating ever more ‘room at the top’ – proves to have, from the standpoint of the present, its darker side. With relative chances of mobility remaining more or less unaltered, an expanded salariat, entailing an increased number of individuals who are at risk of downward mobility, can only result in a rise in the numbers who do actually move down the class hierarchy – that is, from among the children of those men and women who previously benefited from increasing upward mobility into the salariat or from increasing immobility within it.

Upwardly mobile father, downwardly mobile son – 1

Basil

Basil’s father was upwardly mobile, rising from modest social origins to a position of professional eminence. Basil was brought up in a highly cultured home and attended a private school, but his main interests were sport and music rather than academic work. After getting very poor grades at A level – ‘I’m not the brightest spark’ – he left school and joined a firm of accountants. His brothers all went on to university and Basil feels ‘a huge pang ... at not being more a part of that’ and also fears that he was something of a disappointment to his parents.

Basil tried to make a career in accountancy but failed the exams for ‘chartered’ status. He then joined a large catering firm, working chiefly as a buyer. He has subsequently stayed in the same firm and has ‘slowly’ made some progress, though not to a managerial level. Opportunities were restricted after the 1980s recession and he is not ambitious: ‘I wouldn’t fall over anybody to get to the top.’ He remains very interested in sport and especially in music, to which he increasingly devotes himself in a semi-professional capacity.

He lives with his wife in a suburban cul-de-sac of ‘tightly packed’ houses with small gardens.

Upwardly mobile father, downwardly mobile son – 2

Eric

Eric’s father pursued a successful career as a professional engineer and, when Eric was a small child, accepted a highly paid position abroad. A little later his wife and Eric followed. However, within a year the marriage had broken up and Eric and his mother returned to Britain. Eric did well at school, got decent A levels, and decided that he wanted to become a lawyer. He was not attracted to the idea of going to university but entered a solicitor’s office as a trainee legal executive.

Eric eventually qualified for this position, moved to a City firm on quite a high salary, and seemed set for a successful legal career. But in the early 1990s he was unexpectedly made redundant. He lost his mortgage, had other debts, and was declared bankrupt. He worked for a time as a barman – ‘just as a fun job’ – then as a security guard and in a call centre before finding another legal position. However, in 2008 he was again made redundant. This time he left the City, moved to a small flat in a coastal area to be near where his mother lives, and now works as a bouncer in a night club – ‘I’m a very big guy.’

After a failed marriage, he has come out as gay. Although he says that he is now enjoying life more in being free of the stress of working in the City, he has continuing psychological problems that he puts down in part to the loss of his career.

How, then, do the findings on absolute mobility rates we have reported relate to the political discussion of social mobility that has become of increasing prominence in today’s Britain? We suggested in the Introduction that the concern that has developed across the political spectrum in a growing number of western societies with social mobility and equality of opportunity has to be seen in the context of a widening inequality of condition. But what has to be added is that in Britain this concern has been further strengthened on the basis of a claim that over the recent past *social mobility has actually been in decline* – a claim that has then developed into a widely accepted ‘factoid’. This situation is primarily the result of the entry of economists into the field of mobility research. For insofar as the claim of declining mobility has any evidential basis, it lies in just

one piece of research carried out by a group of economists on which they first reported in a paper published in 2004.⁸

Economists sought to show, using data from the 1958 and 1970 birth cohort studies (see Chapter 1, n. 4), that between these two cohorts a decrease occurred in intergenerational *income* mobility. We will say more about this research itself in the following chapter since it has in fact to be seen as referring essentially to relative rather than absolute mobility. What is here chiefly relevant is the extraordinary degree of political impact the research achieved. Acceptance of a problem of declining mobility proved highly attractive both to New Labour, in power at the time, and likewise to the then opposition parties and to the governments that they subsequently formed. Reinforcement could in this way be given to the political strategy, favoured in one form or another by all parties, that gave priority to the creation of a greater equality of opportunity, primarily through educational policy, over measures in some way aimed at countering widening inequalities of condition more directly.

However, because the economists' work was so readily taken to serve political purposes – but in part too because they themselves failed to make it sufficiently clear that their analyses centred on relative rather than absolute mobility – the findings they presented were not only widely discussed but also widely misinterpreted and their implications much exaggerated. Indeed, as growing political interest in mobility fuelled media commentary, what can only be described as a spiral of hyperbole set in. The report that some decline in income mobility had occurred between two birth cohorts, just twelve years apart, became transmuted into claims that social mobility had 'plummeted', was 'at its lowest level ever recorded' or had even 'ground to a halt'. And while commentators for the most part showed no understanding of whether it was in fact absolute or relative mobility that was at issue, it would seem evident enough from the views they expressed that it was, inappropriately, mobility in absolute terms that they had in mind.⁹

⁸ Blanden et al. (2004).

⁹ For further discussion of the sources and extent of the impact of the economists' work and of the increasingly extreme versions of its findings that emerged in the media, see Goldthorpe (2013). The authors themselves became concerned by such misrepresentations (see House of Commons Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families, Oral Evidence, 23 January 2008), and it has also been acknowledged (Blanden and Machin, 2007: 18) that 'the oft-cited finding of a fall

In the light of our own findings, the reception of the economists' work can therefore be only regarded as unfortunate, and in two ways. First, assuming the focus is on absolute mobility, then, at least if mobility is treated in terms of social class rather than income, a concern with declining mobility is simply misplaced. *There is no evidence whatever of such a decline*, and over a much longer period than that considered by the economists. Men and women who were born in the 1980s are no less likely to have moved to different class positions to those of their parents than men and women who were born at any time earlier in the twentieth century. The total mobility rate appears to be highly stable.¹⁰

Second, though, and more seriously, while a preoccupation with supposedly declining mobility has built up, what our findings would point to as the real mobility problem in present-day Britain as regards absolute rates has been very largely overlooked: that is, the reversal of trends in the upward and downward components of the total rate, so that the experience of downward mobility is becoming almost as common as that of upward mobility. And likewise overlooked has then been the crucial part played by class structural change in producing this reversal – as also in producing the previous far more benign pattern of mobility of the golden age.

It might perhaps be thought that the increase in downward mobility that we have revealed is not of major importance in that individuals' relative risks of such mobility have – like other relative rates, as we will show – remained little changed. But the greater numbers becoming downwardly mobile, simply as the result of the greater numbers at risk of so doing, could appear of larger potential significance from a societal point of view. As was observed at the end of Chapter 1, insofar as the experience of mobility carries negative consequences, these would seem more likely to occur with social descent than with social

in intergenerational mobility between the 1958 and 1970 cohorts appears to have been an episode caused by the particular circumstances of the time' rather than indicative of any longer-term trend. Nonetheless, the idea of mobility in decline still persists in official reports (see e.g. Social Mobility Commission, 2016: iv) and among the commentariat (see e.g. Peston, 2017).

¹⁰ Because of the lack of adequate data, little attempt has been made in Britain to investigate income mobility in absolute terms – i.e. how the (real) incomes of men and women compare with those of their parents. In the US several studies have been made but with no clear consensus as yet emerging. See Winship (2017).

ascent. And the possibility of a growing body of men and women who have failed to maintain the more advantaged class positions of their parents becoming associated with rising sociopolitical disaffection, in whatever form this might be expressed, is one that can scarcely be disregarded.

At all events, what remains clear enough is that, while attracting remarkably little attention, a situation has come about that is quite new in modern British history. Young people who are at the present time entering the labour market are, collectively, facing less favourable mobility prospects than did their parents – or their grandparents. Moreover, although the salariat appears still to be growing, it has from the 1990s, as Figure 2.1 brings out, grown far less rapidly than previously. Unless, therefore, this slowdown is countered, it can only be expected that the balance of upward and downward mobility will tend to become yet more unfavourable than it is at present. And the only way in which this balance could be moved back towards something like that which prevailed in the golden age of mobility would be through another marked expansion of positions at the higher levels of the class structure. To repeat, this situation has attracted little political attention and insofar as any recognition of it has been apparent, few policy responses have followed. However, an intervention made by Gordon Brown during his time as prime minister – and in part, it would seem as a reaction to work by sociologists – is of interest and calls for comment.¹¹

Brown's argument was that, in the context of the emerging global economy, the idea that some 'ceiling' might come to exist on the number of high-level jobs, 'thus imposing a limit to the ambitions of the many', has become outdated. If, through educational expansion and reform, Britain can produce a labour force that is 'globally competitive', then jobs requiring high expertise and skill can be pulled into the national economy from all around the world, and there will, therefore, 'be almost no limits to aspirations for upward mobility'. Perhaps the most obvious difficulty with this argument – that Brown in part recognised though did not adequately address – is that in any global competition for attracting 'top-end' jobs, Britain must be at an evident disadvantage in relation to newly industrialising countries, in Asia especially, that are able to provide highly qualified personnel at a

¹¹ Gordon Brown, *The Observer*, 10 February 2008.

much lower cost. Indeed, in what has been aptly called the 'global auction' that now operates in this regard, the weak position of Britain, along with other western societies, could be seen as constituting in itself a major problem, and one that could indeed lead to the slowing expansion of the higher levels of the class structure that is already in evidence ending in a complete stall.¹²

Moreover, a related, yet deeper, difficulty underlying the Brown scenario is the extreme 'supply-side' assumptions on which it rests. What is supposed is that if, by the development of its educational system, Britain can demonstrate that it has an appropriately qualified labour force, this supply will simply create its own demand, so that higher-level class positions and in turn opportunities for upward mobility will multiply.¹³ This can be taken as a prime expression of the wide political consensus that exists, as we have already remarked, in seeing educational policy as central to all attempts at increasing social mobility. However, the role played by education in processes of mobility is an issue on which the disconnect between sociological research and thinking in political circles becomes apparent in many respects – as will emerge in later chapters. In the present connection, what has to be observed is that while there are no market or other mechanisms that readily bring into equilibrium the general level and distribution of educational qualifications in the labour force and the structure of demand in the labour market, the empirical evidence would strongly suggest that *it is easier for supply to adapt to demand than vice versa*.

The example of the golden age is itself instructive in this regard. When, following the Second World War, the expansion of the managerial and professional salariat began, Britain did not, by the standards of other economically advanced societies, have an educational system that was all that highly developed at its secondary and tertiary levels. But this did not prevent the expansion of managerial and

¹² On 'the global auction', see Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011).

¹³ Having read a paper by Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007), in which class structural effects on mobility were emphasised, a close political associate of Gordon Brown did in fact enquire of the authors if they had ever heard of Say's Law. The reference is to an argument advanced by the French political economist, J.-B. Say (1767–1832), which is often, but rather misleadingly, summarised as 'supply creates its own demand'. Say himself appears never to have used the phrase.

professional employment from going ahead – together with the steady increase in upward mobility that was thus generated. Results from the Nuffield mobility study are again revealing. They show that of men born between 1908 and 1947 who by 1972 had gained access to the managerial component of the salariat only one in twenty had a degree and *over two-fifths had no formal qualifications at all*. These men had in fact mostly risen to managerial positions over the course of their working lives, regardless of their lack of ‘credentials’, and, one has to suppose, primarily on the basis of their demonstrated ability to do well in jobs that needed filling. Moreover, even among men found in professional occupations only one in five had a degree, with most of the remainder having entered into professional employment not through qualifications gained within the mainstream of the educational system but through what were in effect professional apprenticeships and examinations taken in the course of working life under the auspices of a great diversity of ‘qualifying associations’. In other words, it was demand that mattered; and while anything above secondary level qualifications obtained before entering the labour market virtually guaranteed an eventual managerial or professional position, such positions could be, and very frequently were, accessed via other routes.¹⁴

It might be thought that by the present day a high level of formal qualifications at labour market entry has become a more important requirement for positions within the salariat as the result of what economists refer to as ‘skill-biased technological change’ and the growth of the ‘knowledge economy’. How far this is so is an issue to which we will return later in Chapter 7. But what is more relevant to observe here is that while throughout the twentieth century demand ran ahead of, or at all events readily accommodated, the supply of highly qualified individuals, even as this supply increased, it is by no means clear that this continues to be the case. A concern has of late become apparent in Britain, as in a number of other advanced societies,

¹⁴ See Goldthorpe (1982: table 2) and on the importance of access to the professions via qualifying associations, Millerson (1964). It may be added that very questionable supply-side assumptions also underlie the Leitch Review of Skills (Leitch, 2006), which are challenged in analyses subsequently made by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2015). These show *inter alia* that across European countries the relationship between the employment share of graduates and the growth of high-skilled occupational groups is, if anything, *negative*.

regarding the possibility of *overqualification* in the labour market: that is, the possibility, in direct contradiction of the Brown scenario, of the supply of the highly qualified outstripping demand for them. And it is, for example, relevant to note that in Britain today the idea – and, more importantly, the reality – of the ‘graduate job’ would seem to be fast fading away, with many graduates now entering occupations that in previous generations would have been largely filled by non-graduates.¹⁵

As regards the future shape of the class structure, and thus of the pattern of absolute rates of mobility within it, forecasting is extremely difficult, and this should be clearly acknowledged. It could well be that the developments that created mobility’s golden age will come to be seen as a historical ‘one-off’ from the standpoint of a subsequent period in which change in the class structure is relatively slow and limited, at least so far as any upgrading is concerned. But what can be said is that *if* any return towards the conditions of the golden age does prove possible, this is unlikely to be through the effects of educational policy in the context of the global labour market. Policies will rather be needed – as we will discuss further in the concluding chapter – in quite different areas, such as industrial strategy and the advancement of the range and quality of social and other public services: that is, policies directed by a particular vision of economic and social development, rather than simply of economic growth, that can ensure that within the national economy fewer men and women are confined to low-grade wage work while increased demand and opportunity are created at higher levels of employment for those who have come through the educational system with appropriate trained capacity and expertise.

¹⁵ On the twentieth-century situation, see Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011b). On more recent changes in graduate employment, see again the report of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (2015). An early recognition of the possibility of overqualification in the British labour market can be found in Wolf (2002: chs. 1, 6 esp.) and see further the discussion in Chapter 5.