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978-0-521-09466-5 - The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour

John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt

Excerpt

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1. Introduction

The primary aim of this monograph is descriptive: to give some account of the attitudes and behaviour of a sample of 'affluent' manual workers in the context of their industrial employment. A secondary aim is theoretical: to examine how the attitudes and behaviour in question can best be explained and understood. The presentation of our findings begins in chapter 2 with a fairly detailed examination of our sample's experience of their industrial jobs and of the nature of their attachment to the organisations which employ them. On this basis, the argument is then advanced that among the men we studied a particular *orientation* to work—one of a markedly instrumental kind—is predominant. In chapters 3 to 6 this argument is developed in relation to material which covers the other main areas of our workers' industrial lives. At various points in these chapters we are also concerned with the explanatory usefulness—and limitations—in regard to our findings of certain current theoretical approaches in the field of industrial sociology. In chapter 7 we move on to the question of the social correlates and sources of the view of work which characterises our affluent workers, and which is reflected in their industrial attitudes and behaviour in a variety of ways. Our principal objective is to develop a number of explanatory hypotheses; but some empirical material—in part of a confirmatory nature—is also produced. Finally, chapter 8 briefly reviews what appear to us as the main implications of the monograph in both its descriptive and theoretical aspects.

The research on which this monograph is based was carried out as part of a more general study of the sociology of the affluent worker. The main objective of this study was to test empirically the widely accepted thesis of working-class *embourgeoisement*: the thesis that, as manual workers and their families achieve relatively high incomes and living standards, they assume a way of life which is more characteristically 'middle class' and become in fact progressively assimilated into middle-class society. This question of *embourgeoisement* is not a concern of the present work other than in an indirect way: it is hoped that this and other similar publications, dealing with issues somewhat apart from the central problem of the research, will preface, and facilitate, the writing of the final report. However, the fact that this monograph is, as it were, a by-product of an enquiry with a

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different focus¹ has always to be kept in mind in assessing the wider significance of its findings. Considerations relevant to the main purpose of the project have, of course, largely determined the way in which the workers to be studied were selected and also the design of the interviewing schedules, which were our chief research instruments.

In planning the field investigations which formed the major part of the research, our first concern was to find a *locale* for these which would be *as favourable as possible* for the validation of the *embourgeoisement* thesis. We had, from the outset, considerable doubts about the soundness of the arguments involved in this, at least in the crude form in which they were usually expressed. These doubts were set out in publications prior to the start of our research.² Thus, we felt it important that our test of the thesis should, if possible, be made a critical one in the following sense: that if, in the case we studied, a process of *embourgeoisement* was shown *not* to be in evidence, then it could be regarded as extremely unlikely that such a process was occurring to any significant extent in British society as a whole. This strategy of the critical case involved, therefore, an attempt, in the first place, to specify theoretically the ideal kind of *locale* for our purpose—that is, the social setting in which *embourgeoisement* would seem most probable; and then, secondly, a decision about the best ‘real-life’ approximation to this.

The problems which arose in this connection were numerous; but although the ways in which they were resolved are, of course, vital in relation to our project as a whole, they need not concern us here at any length.³ It will be sufficient to say that our eventual choice fell on the town of Luton in south-west Bedfordshire, and that among the chief considerations favouring this were the following:

(i) Luton was a prosperous and growing industrial centre in an area of the country which had in recent years experienced general economic expansion.

¹ A further monograph, *The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1968), has appeared as a companion piece to the present study, and the final report on the project as a whole, in which discussion of the thesis of *embourgeoisement* and related issues occupies a central place, is *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Cambridge, 1969).

² See David Lockwood, ‘The “New Working Class”’, *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1960), and John H. Goldthorpe and David Lockwood, ‘Affluence and the British Class Structure’, *Sociological Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (July 1963).

³ They are discussed at length in *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, ch. 2. For an early attempt at specifying the major conditions favourable to *embourgeoisement*, see David Lockwood and John H. Goldthorpe, ‘The Manual Worker: Affluence, Aspiration and Assimilation’, paper presented to the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association, 1962 (available from the Department of Applied Economics, University of Cambridge).

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(ii) In consequence, the town's labour force contained a high proportion of geographically mobile workers—workers who, it might be supposed, had come to Luton in part at least in search of higher living standards.

(iii) Also in consequence of the town's rapid growth, a high proportion of its population lived in new housing areas which included a relatively large amount of private development.

(iv) At the same time, Luton was somewhat removed from the older industrial regions of the country and was thus not dominated by their traditions of industrial relations or of industrial life generally.

(v) Luton contained a number of industrial firms noted for their high wages, their advanced personnel and welfare policies, and their records of industrial peace.

Once this setting for the research had been chosen, our next step was to draw up the sample of affluent workers to be studied through an interviewing programme. It was decided that the best basis for doing this would be provided by the pay-rolls of three of Luton's leading firms, which accounted between them for about 30% of the total labour force of the town and its immediate environs. We wished that, in the same way as with the *locale* for the study, the interviewing sample should be subject to certain specifications designed to favour the *embourgeoisement* thesis; and in this respect the personnel statistics which the firms were able to supply were invaluable to us. A further advantage of basing the sample on a small number of establishments was that we could thus collect fairly detailed information on the conditions of work and work situations of all the individuals concerned. In particular, we wished to examine the effect on workers' attitudes and behaviour of different types of production system, and our choice of firms was in fact made so that three major types—small-batch, large-batch and mass, and process production—were represented.¹

The three firms in question were: Vauxhall Motors Ltd, a totally owned subsidiary of General Motors Corporation, engaged in Luton in the manufacture of saloon cars, station wagons and vans; The Skefko Ball Bearing Company Ltd, a member of the international SKF Organisation,

¹ This reflected our concern to incorporate into our research a full investigation of the industrial lives of the workers we studied. Current discussion of the *embourgeoisement* issue revealed a very one-sided emphasis on the worker as consumer rather than producer. However, we did not believe that in this respect we had enough information to follow through the strategy of the critical case to the point of concentrating on one particular kind of technological environment as being probably that most conducive to *embourgeoisement*. Rather, we aimed at covering a number of the most important general types of industrial technology. In this we were guided by the classification of production systems made in Joan Woodward, *Management and Technology*, H.M.S.O. (London, 1958).

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producing ball and roller bearings;¹ and Laporte Chemicals Ltd, a member of the Laporte Group of companies which at its Luton plant produces a range of ammonium, potassium, sodium and barium compounds.

Within these enterprises, we then decided to confine our attention to male employees who were working in shop-floor jobs and who were in addition: (i) between the ages of 21 and 46; (ii) married and living with their wives; (iii) *regularly earning at least £17 per week gross* (October 1962); and (iv) resident in Luton itself or in immediately adjacent housing areas.² Further, we decided that in the case of each plant we would concentrate on men performing types of work which were central to the main production systems that were in operation. In Vauxhall, thus, we defined our field of interest as covering men who were engaged in assembly-line work. In Skefko, we concentrated on machine operators involved in small- and large-batch production, together with machine setters and craftsmen who were concerned in one way or another with servicing machines. And in Laporte we aimed to take in all types of process worker and all craftsmen engaged on process maintenance.³ In effect, therefore, the 'population' of our critical case was made up of workers in the above occupational categories who also met our criteria regarding age, marital status, earnings and residence. It should be recognised, then, that the decisions taken here in defining the workers to be studied are in some degree arbitrary, other than in relation to our concern with the *embourgeoisement* issue, and that this is true in particular of the numbers of men covered by the different occupational categories which were included.

In sampling our population for interviewing purposes, certain difficulties and complications arose which are explained in appendix B. However, the sample which was eventually obtained was one of 326 individuals. Of these, we were unable to contact 12 (3.7%), and 64 (19.6%) refused to participate. This left, therefore, 250 (76.7%) of the sample who agreed to be interviewed at their place of work. After these interviews had been carried out, we then asked all those we had seen if they would agree to a further interview, together with their wives, in their own

¹ Skefko have in fact two physically separate plants in Luton. These are, however, in many ways interdependent and, for our purposes, could reasonably be treated as one.

² This condition was relaxed slightly for Laporte workers so as to include three 'satellite' communities very close to Luton in which there was some concentration of Laporte employees.

³ To be entirely consistent here we should have included two other types of worker from Vauxhall: men engaged in the manufacture (as opposed to assembly) of components and, as in the other plants, craftsmen. However, this would have been beyond the resources of the project, and we thus decided to concentrate on the assemblers as the most distinctive group.

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[More information](#)*Introduction*TABLE 1. *Distribution of final sample by firm and type of work*

Firm	Type of work	No. of workers interviewed
Vauxhall	Assembly	86
		— 86
Skfko	Machining	41
	Machine-setting	23
	Maintenance etc. (craftsmen)	45
		— 109
Laporte	Process work	23
	Process maintenance (craftsmen)	11
		— 34
TOTAL		229

homes. Of the 250, 229 (91.6% or 70.3% of the original sample) consented to this, and these men—and their wives—were then taken as being the main subjects of our research.¹ The distribution of the 229 men between the three firms and the different types of work which we considered within each firm is shown in table 1.²

For reasons which are given in appendix B, our sample is not in fact a random one. Nonetheless, there are good grounds—also noted in this appendix—for regarding it as being for the most part highly representative. The one main exception to this is that the number of assemblers included is a good deal too low, judged by the size of this occupational category relative to the others which the population comprises. This is of little consequence since, as we have already noted, the number of men in each category is itself largely arbitrary. What *is* important to realise in this connection is that, in using the interview material based on the sample, no great significance can attach to data relating to the sample *as a whole* where there is any marked variation in the pattern of response from one occupational group to another.³ For this reason the discussion of our interview findings throughout this study is most frequently based upon comparisons and differences between occupational groups, and generalisations concerning the sample as a whole are introduced into the argument only where *all* groups display an essentially similar pattern.

In addition to this main sample, we also planned, for comparative purposes, a sample of lower-level (i.e. non-managerial) white-collar

¹ Interviewing took place between October 1962 and February 1964.

² Table A1 in appendix A (Additional tables) gives corresponding details of response rates.

³ For, to the extent, of course, that such variation exists, the 'overall' pattern of response of the sample will be a function partly of the number of respondents in each group.

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employees, drawn from the same three firms. Unfortunately, administrative and other difficulties prevented the inclusion of Vauxhall, and the sample had thus to be taken from the relevant grades in Skefko and Laporte. We again limited our attention to married men between the ages of 21 and 46, but in this case no minimum level of earnings was fixed and the requirement of residence in Luton was dropped. In all, 75 white-collar workers were approached¹ and of this number 54 (72%) agreed to our request for a single interview, at home and together with their wives.

Table 2 gives some indication of the relative economic positions of our affluent manual workers and the men in the white-collar sample in terms of age, income and number of dependent children. The data show that the white-collar workers tend to hold some advantage over the manual workers in that they have higher *family* incomes (more white-collar wives worked) and fewer dependent children (white-collar couples had smaller families at all age levels); in other words, the advantages appear to result from some more or less deliberate family 'policy'. On the other hand, considering the amount brought in weekly by the chief breadwinner, it is the manual sample who are better off.

Considered as a study in industrial sociology, it is certain that this monograph suffers from various shortcomings through its dependence upon research in which the industrial attitudes and behaviour of the subjects of the investigation were but one of several areas of interest. On almost every topic discussed in the pages which follow it is not difficult to think of further information which it would have been desirable to have but which our enquiry neglected. Furthermore, our research methods were not as rigorous as might have been possible in a more restricted project. For example, a study concerned with 'attitudes' should, ideally, have used more sophisticated methods of ordering and measuring these than we were able to apply across the variety of issues our interviews covered. And, similarly, to study 'behaviour' in the most satisfactory way would have called for more systematic observational studies, in addition to interviewing, than we were able to carry out.² Finally, there is, of course, the point that the workers we studied were—with the central objectives of our research in mind—a highly selected group. It is particularly important that this should be remembered wherever material concerning our sample is

¹ In Skefko, clerks, cost clerks and 'correspondents' (clerks dealing with orders); in Laporte, clerks and commercial assistants. All eligible men in these grades were included.

² In all three firms a good deal of observational work was in fact performed, but this was of an impressionistic kind rather than the detailed and quantitative study of the behaviour of individuals and groups which is possible, say, through 'activity sampling' techniques.

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	Manual sample (N = 229) percentage	White-collar sample (N = 54) percentage
<i>Age</i>		
21-30	23	28
31-40	49	41
41+	28	31
	—	—
	100	100
<i>Income*</i>		
Husband: Under £18	47	61
£18-£23. 19s.	49	32
£24 and over	4	6
No information	1	1
	—	—
	101	100
Family: Under £18	19	20
£18-£23. 19s.	56	39
£24-£29. 19s.	18	26
£30 and over	7	11
No information	1	4
	—	—
	101	100
<i>Dependent children†</i>		
0	17	35
1	28	32
2	34	19
3	14	9
4+	7	6
	—	—
	100	101

* Reported average weekly earnings, *net* of tax etc., i.e. 'take-home pay'.

† I.e. children under 15 plus children over 15 still in full-time education.

used as a basis for the discussion of general theoretical issues: the significance of the sample must always be taken as that of a special rather than of a typical case.¹

¹ It would, however, be wrong to suppose that, in terms of their 'affluence' alone, the workers we studied represented very special groups *within* their firms' labour forces. All assemblers with two years' service at Vauxhall, and some with less, earned more than our £17 per week limit, and so did the large majority of the Skefko craftsmen and setters and of the Laporte craftsmen. With the machinists and the process workers, we would estimate that we were confined to the best-paid third. In accounting for the quite small numbers of these workers included in our sample, the limiting effects of our other specifications—regarding age and residence especially—must be borne in mind.

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On the other hand, some compensating advantages of drawing our data from a wider study do exist; and, as far as possible, the monograph has been designed so as to exploit these. First, while our information on our respondents' attitudes and behaviour in the context of their employment may not always be as detailed or as precise as might be wished, it is nonetheless fairly extensive in its range. For example, in subsequent chapters we deal with data relating to the worker and his job, the worker and his work group, the worker and his firm, the worker and his union, and the worker and his economic future. The same range has not always been covered in other studies of industrial employees. Secondly, and more importantly, we also have a considerable amount of material at our disposal concerning our respondents' 'out-plant' lives. Because the perspectives of our research were much broader than those of most specifically 'industrial' studies, we know something about the men in our sample not only as industrial employees but also as husbands and fathers, as neighbours and friends, as individuals with certain life-histories and objectives and so on. We have, therefore, the opportunity of seeing their attitudes and behaviour as workers not in the context of the industrial enterprise alone but, rather, in the much wider context provided by family, community and class.

It is chiefly on account of these features of our data that we believe the present study can have some theoretical as well as descriptive interest. On the basis of our wide range of information about the men we studied, pertaining to both their working and non-working lives, it would seem possible to offer something of value towards the examination of questions such as the following: In what degree and in what ways are industrial attitudes and behaviour *patterned*—so that the nature of the worker's relationship, with say, his employing organisation is associated with the nature of his relationships with his workmates, his supervisor, or his union? To the extent that such patterning is in evidence, in what terms is this to be explained and understood? Is it to be seen, for example, as being determined primarily by features of the work situation itself—as being, say, the result of workers' experience of, and reaction to, the work-tasks and -roles which they are required to perform? Or is it rather the case that any such pattern may equally, or perhaps more basically, derive from a particular orientation which workers have taken towards employment—from the wants and expectations they have of it, and thus from the way in which they *define* their work situation rather than simply respond to this? If this latter alternative applies, what are the major determinants, external to the work situation, of the meaning which men give to their work and of the place

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and function they accord to work within their lives as a whole? This study does not pretend to make any final statement on these questions. It does, however, offer data which enable them to be raised and, hopefully, to be answered at least in part in a specific case. And it is largely in this way that the material which is presented gains such wider significance as it may be said to possess.

Lastly, though, we would wish to suggest that the interest of the monograph at a purely descriptive level should not be underestimated. The workers we have studied, if not highly typical of the present, may well prove to be in many ways more typical of the future. This is a point to which we shall from time to time return in the course of later chapters as we compare the findings of our research with those of investigations carried out among less affluent workers living in older, more 'traditional', industrial communities. However, one likely objection to this claim of 'prototypicality' may perhaps be anticipated at this stage: that is, that the workers in our sample are all employed in establishments using more or less 'conventional' methods of manufacture—whereas the industrial workers of the future must surely be thought of as working in plants with highly automated production systems. The important question here is, of course, what one means by 'the future'.¹ If one is taking the very long view, then it is no doubt reasonable to suppose the near universality of the automatic factory. But if, on the other hand, one restricts one's range to, say, the next few decades—as we would wish to do—then the idea of fully automated industry as the dominant type appears to be somewhat premature. The best assessments would seem to indicate that during this period, even in the most highly developed countries, the more advanced conventional methods of production—and notably mass production—will, on balance, decline little in importance, and that it may even be the case that the extent of their utilisation will increase more than that of automation itself.² Thus, we would argue, workers in jobs of the type with which we are concerned by no means represent figures of diminishing significance on the industrial scene; and the great interest which automation now excites should not be allowed to distract us from learning more about such workers, particularly in the condition new to them of relative prosperity.

¹ And also, perhaps, what one means by 'automation'. We use the term here in its strict sense to refer to production systems which involve an automatic and in some respects self-regulating chain of process. See L. Landon Goodman, *Man and Automation* (London, 1957), pp. 24–6.

² See, for example, Georges Friedmann, *Le Travail en Miettes*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1964), pp. 14–22 and the statistical appendices; also Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, *Automation* (London, 1956).

2. The worker and his job

In the previous chapter, table 2 showed the distribution of our sample of 229 manual workers among the three firms on which the sample is based and in relation to types of work characteristic of the production systems of these firms. The different groups of workers represented in this table can also be classified into three main skill levels, as follows:

(i) *Highly skilled*: the craftsmen in Skefko and Laporte—toolmakers, millwrights and other maintenance men—who are all workers with apprenticeships or comparable training.

(ii) *Relatively skilled*: the setters in Skefko, who have not in general had any lengthy training but who have ‘picked up’ over time the particular skill which their present jobs require.¹

(iii) *Semi-skilled*: the ordinary production workers in all three firms—assemblers, machinists and process workers—who are performing jobs which usually call for only very short training periods of a few hours or days.²

In considering the relationship between the worker and his job³ it will be useful to combine this classification by skill with that based on type of work performed. By so doing the sample may be divided into five ‘occupational groups’ in the manner shown in table 3. Our findings reveal that for the workers in these five groups, industrial employment offers significantly different patterns of satisfaction and deprivation, and further that these men differ too in the stance they take towards work and in the meanings they give to it.⁴ At the same time, though, our data also indicate that these

¹ One foreman in Skefko remarked that a good machinist, after having watched his setter working for several years, could almost do a set-up himself without any training at all. Generally, though, it was thought that new setters needed to work under supervision for a month or more before they were proficient.

² The main exception to this arose in the case of nineteen of the machinists (Skefko) who had been trained to do some of the setting for their own machines.

³ The term ‘job’ is commonly used with two quite different meanings, the distinction between which is of some importance to the content of this chapter: ‘job’ may refer either to the worker’s immediate work-task and work-role or, more broadly, to his employment in a particular firm. In writing—as in interviewing—we have found that the only practical solution is to use the term in both senses and to make explicit which is intended in any particular case other than where the context leaves no doubt or where the ambiguity is unimportant or convenient.

⁴ The bringing together of the craftsmen from two different firms is to be justified on this basis.