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978-0-521-09526-6 - The Affluent Worker: Political Attitudes and Behaviour

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

Excerpt

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## I. Introduction

The aims of this monograph are threefold: first, to give some account of the political attitudes and behaviour of a sample of affluent workers; second, to examine various possible explanations of the variation in voting behaviour within the sample; and third, on the basis of these findings, to offer some general observations on the changing pattern of working-class politics.

Following this introduction to the monograph, chapter 2 consists of a fairly detailed description of our respondents' voting behaviour and of the nature of their attachments to the two main political parties. We find that a large and stable majority of our workers are supporters of the Labour Party, even though there are signs that in many cases this support is of a rather 'instrumental' kind. This leads us to a discussion of the view that affluence is a factor leading to a decline in Labour loyalties among the working class, and in chapter 3 we examine this thesis in some detail in the light of the data we have collected. Finding little evidence in support of this idea, we then turn, in chapter 4, to consider two other possible sources of influence on the voting behaviour of our affluent workers: first, the extent of what we call a worker's 'white-collar affiliations', and secondly, the factor of trade union membership. We show that both these variables are associated with our workers' propensity to vote for the Labour Party, and we also attempt to assess their relative importance. Finally, in chapter 5, we examine some of the broader implications of our findings in the light of the change from a 'traditional' to a more 'privatised' style of working-class life.

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*: that is, 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 thesis of *embourgeoisement* has a direct bearing on the present monograph since it has in most

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versions embodied the claim that affluence brings about a change in the political orientations and party loyalties of the more prosperous sections of the working class. Indeed, the simple theory of the economic determination of politics which is implied by this thesis was regularly invoked throughout the decade of the 1950s to explain what then seemed to be the secular decline of the Labour Party as a political force. The examination of the political behaviour of a group of affluent workers is, then, in itself one way of testing the *embourgeoisement* thesis.

At the same time, it should be made clear that the more general study which we undertook was not solely, or even mainly, concerned with the political aspects of *embourgeoisement*.<sup>1</sup> The fact that this monograph is, as it were, a by-product of an inquiry with a much broader focus has always to be kept in mind. For 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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> The present work is a companion piece to the already published monograph by John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, *The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (Cambridge, 1968). It is hoped to publish a report dealing with the family and community life of our affluent workers; and a final volume which aims to give a comprehensive view of the results of our study is in preparation. A preliminary survey of the research as a whole has already been published: see John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Frank Bechhofer and Jennifer Platt, 'The Affluent Worker and the Thesis of *Embourgeoisement*: some preliminary research findings', *Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 1 (January 1967).

<sup>2</sup> 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).

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

(ii) In consequence of this, 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, including 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 and 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

<sup>1</sup> They will, of course, be fully discussed in our final volume. But 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.

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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' industrial 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 all represented.<sup>1</sup>

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, producing ball and roller bearings;<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> 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* (London, H.M.S.O., 1958).

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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 *em-bourgeoisement* 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 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. The distribution of the 229 men among the three firms and the different types of work which we considered within each firm is shown in table 1.<sup>2</sup>

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 the 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. But this is of little consequence since, as we have already noted, the number of men in each category is itself largely arbitrary. Moreover, the data presented in the text, relating to the sample as a

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix A for corresponding details of response rates.

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[More information](#)*The affluent worker: political attitudes*TABLE 1. *Distribution of final sample by firm and type of work*

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

whole, do not show any marked variation from one occupational group to another.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to this main sample, we also planned, for comparative purposes, a sample of lower-level (i.e. non-managerial) white-collar 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<sup>2</sup> were approached 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-

<sup>1</sup> If such variation had existed, then, of course, the 'overall' pattern of response of the sample would be a function partly of the number of respondents in each group. For an analysis of the relationships between voting behaviour and occupational group see appendix B.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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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
	<hr/> 100	<hr/> 100
<i>Income</i>		
(Reported average weekly earnings, net of tax, etc., i.e. 'take-home pay')		
<i>Husband:</i>		
Under £18	47	61
£18-£23 19s.	49	32
£24 and over	4	6
No information	1	1
	<hr/> 101	<hr/> 100
<i>Family:</i>		
Under £18	19	20
£18-£23 19s.	56	39
£24-£29 19s.	18	26
£30 and over	7	11
No information	1	4
	<hr/> 101	<hr/> 100
<i>Dependent children</i>		
(i.e. children under 15 plus children over 15 still in full-time education)		
0	17	35
1	28	32
2	34	19
3	14	9
4+	7	6
	<hr/> 100	<hr/> 101

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, though, considering the amount brought in weekly by the chief breadwinner, it is the manual sample who are better off.

Considered as a study in electoral sociology, it is certain that this monograph suffers from various shortcomings through its dependence upon research in which the political attitudes and behaviour of the

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men we interviewed were but one very limited area of interest among many others. On almost every topic discussed in the following chapters it is not difficult to think of further information concerning their political orientations which it would have been desirable to have but which our inquiry neglected. Furthermore, our research methods were not as rigorous as might have been possible in a more restricted study. For example, a study concerned with 'attitudes' should, ideally, have used more sophisticated methods of ordering and measuring these; and again, ideally, some kind of longitudinal study would have been necessary for a systematic investigation of the process of change in political attitudes that is implied by the concept of *embourgeoisement*. 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. And it is particularly important that this should be remembered wherever material concerning our sample is used as a basis for the discussion of general theoretical issues.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, though, some compensating advantages of drawing our data from a wider study do exist. In the first place, even though our information on our respondents' political attitudes and behaviour may not be as detailed or as precise as might be wished, we do have a considerable amount of material at our disposal concerning other aspects of our workers' lives. Because the perspectives of our research were much broader than those of most studies of voting behaviour, we know something about the men in our sample not only as voters but also as industrial employees, 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 members of the electorate in the much more extensive context of work, community and class. In the present monograph we refer at several points to the findings of that part of our research that dealt with industrial attitudes and behaviour; and these findings—together with those that have so far emerged from our study of community relationships—play an indispensable role in our interpretation of the

<sup>1</sup> 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 in our sample, the limiting effects of our other specifications—regarding age and residence especially—must be borne in mind.



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overall pattern of our workers' party attachments and political orientations. Again, in considering differences in voting behaviour within the sample, we have been able to take into account the social origins and occupational histories of both our respondents and their wives; and these data prove to have an important bearing on the political aspects of *embourgeoisement*.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, there is the fact that our wider study was based on a sample of workers which was chosen as a 'critical' rather than as a representative case. As we have already made clear, our respondents were selected not only because they met our criterion of affluence but also because the kind of community in which they lived was likely to be one where any process of working-class *embourgeoisement* would be relatively well advanced. At the beginning of this chapter we listed several features of the town of Luton which made it an especially favourable *locale* for the purposes of our research. It was a growing and prosperous centre of employment well removed from the older, more traditional industrial regions of the country. It contained a number of firms noted for their high wages and a considerable proportion of its population lived in new housing areas. Finally, the labour force of the town included a large number of immigrant workers who one may assume had moved there in search of a higher standard of living. These features of Luton are reflected in the sample of affluent workers that we selected from three of the town's major industrial firms. Thus 71% of our men were not natives of Luton or of the Luton district, and in 56% of cases their parents were living entirely outside the Luton area. Of these men who had moved to Luton after their marriage, 61% gave as their reason for moving the availability of housing, or better housing than they already had, and 46% said that they had moved there in search of better paid work. Again, 55% of our respondents lived outside of typically working-class localities, such as those in the centre of Luton or on the council estates, and 57% of them either owned or were buying their houses. Thus to a high degree our sample is made up of workers who, from the point of view of their economic aspirations, their uprootedness from family and community of origin and their residential location, might be regarded as prime candidates for *embourgeoisement*. It is mainly in these terms that the findings of the present monograph must be evaluated. For, although our findings cannot be regarded as typical of the political attitudes and behaviour of affluent workers in general,

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they do constitute what we would regard as crucial empirical data for testing the political implications of the *embourgeoisement* thesis.

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. One likely objection to this claim of 'prototypicality' may perhaps be anticipated: 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'.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 them, particularly in the condition new to them of relative prosperity.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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).