

14 Reproducing hierarchy

Stratification remains a powerful influence in the late modern world. Throughout, this book has critically examined claims that social divisions are increasingly 'free-floating' of structural relations, and that agency is now dominant in social affairs, with a weakening of social structural constraints. Yet whilst culture and consumption have become key arenas of social life, it is apparent that economic divisions and inequalities are still bound up in the formation of cultural lifestyles, and that the hierarchical differentiation of lifestyles remains a key feature of stratification processes. In recent times it has become commonplace to associate stratification with structural determinism, and to see an emphasis on material inequality as the last gasp of a now outmoded commitment to 'grand theory'. Postmodern accounts of 'difference' have stressed the hyper-differentiated nature of social relations, arguing that the complex nature of our social ties means that social identities can never be 'read off' from social location. The limitations of structural categories in explaining behaviour, and the increasing awareness of diversity in social arrangements, have been taken as evidence that 'action' has been increasingly de-coupled from 'structure'. Because of their complexity, social relations are presented as fragmented, as liquid flows and shifting attachments, so that the formation of identities appears regulated by ideas and meanings, rather than by material structures. This, as we have seen, amounts to the abandonment of the very idea of stratification and inequality, in favour of accounts of the discursive construction of difference. Other arguments focus on the increasing role of choice and reflexivity in social life, so that whilst inequalities persist, the 'objective' and 'subjective' dimensions of social life are increasingly divorced. Individuals are 'disembedded' from social constraints: 'Individuals become actors, builders, jugglers, stage managers of their own biographies and identities and also of their social links and networks' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002: 23). In this argument there is a new indeterminacy between structure and agency, between social conditions and values, so that individuals are now increasingly obliged to reflexively fashion their own biographies. As Giddens puts it, in this brave new world, 'we are, not what we are but what we make ourselves' (1991: 75).

We should be highly sceptical of these claims, which some have seen as an unacknowledged 'middle-class' standpoint on social arrangements (Savage 2003).

It is frequently noted that the less advantaged still live lives encumbered by structural constraints, and that inequality continues to mean that some have more freedom and choice than others:

For the educated middle class with potentially high-earning capacities . . . the arguments about the growing individualisation of advanced industrial societies in which personal biographies are increasingly a matter for reflexive choice . . . may have some resonance. . . . But for 'generic labourers' with few skills and little social capital, especially the type of social capital that is valued in a service-dominated economy, notions of increased agency in the constitution and reconstitution of their lives and the growing ability to construct an employment career that is based on reflexive choice have never had much resonance. Older patterns in which class position and geographical location broadly determine the shape of their future lives for working class young people still have a persistent hold.

(McDowell 2003: 221)

And despite the increasingly cosmopolitan, mobile and rapidly changing nature of the world: 'Most people live in narrow gemeinschaftlich worlds of neighbourhood and kin. Cosmopolitan intellectuals seem all too ready to forget or to deny the small-scale domesticity of most people's lives' (Pahl 1991: 346).

These are important points. But we cannot simply counterpose the agentic freedom of the privileged few with the structural constraint of the disadvantaged. The structural *should* not be opposed to 'choice' (in which increasing choice means the demise of structure), rather 'structure' is better understood as consisting of the (patterned) choices that people do in fact make. As we have seen, at every level of the social scale, people's choices continue to be highly patterned, so that any rejection of the ordered nature of social life is unwarranted. Social location continues to be an important factor in the construction of cultural identities and social difference, and inequality remains as relevant as ever in shaping destinies, and in providing the materials for social and cultural differentiation, for rich and poor, excluded and included alike. The more privileged do have greater freedom and choice, but this is as an *aspect of their social position*, rather than the negation of it.

Persistent inequality

Despite enormous changes in modern society, there are remarkable continuities in patterns of inequality. These continuities are not manifested in the *fixed attachment* to unequal positions, nor in the *denial* of opportunities to the disadvantaged, but rather emerge in *unequal patterns of movement* to new social positions. Even as the less disadvantaged have taken up bright new opportunities they still receive an unequal share of them, maintaining their position relative to others. The world has changed, but relative inequality persists within the very fabric of that change. So, despite a dramatic improvement in general standards of living, and

the provision of health care in all western societies, marked inequalities in health remain, surviving the jump from absolute to relative inequality. The same pattern is evident in the expansion of educational and labour-market opportunities and rising affluence which have been a key feature of late modernity. The less advantaged have benefited enormously from these changes, which have helped transform their lives; but so too have the advantaged, and at about the same rate. Even as the disadvantaged have stepped forward to better lives, others have stayed in front of them. Of course, these are aggregate tendencies. Western societies have been characterised by dramatic upward social mobility, with more 'room at the top', so that many children from disadvantaged backgrounds have travelled to the most privileged social positions. The inequality lies in the fact that privileged children remain much more likely to achieve such positions. So the patterning of inequality *within* social change makes the fact of inequality much less visible for the people who experience it. But it persists nonetheless.

This continuity of inequality in the face of dramatic change for all is a remarkable feature of social life, and takes some explaining. Take the intergenerational inheritance of relative social position. As we have seen, if we look over the long term we can see a significant loosening of the impact of parental position on where a child ends up. But to identify this we have to take a very long-term view indeed. From generation to generation there has been only the most imperceptible change, with the decline in relative inequality occurring 'by slow degrees' (Prandy *et al.* 2003a). The ability of parents to hand down social advantages to their children obviously depends on the changing nature of the 'currency' of advantage and position, and the last two hundred years have seen some truly amazing shifts in the opportunity structure: the decline in the importance of agriculture, landed property and 'family' firms; the rise of education, bureaucratic careers, white-collar employment and credentialism; and the emergence of consumer society and cultural careers. Yet family influence on social position has proved 'remarkably buoyant' in the face of these changes (Prandy and Bottero 2000a: 276).

Social advantage – in whatever form – gives those who possess it a considerable head start in weathering the social changes and upheaval that confront successive generations. If you start ahead you tend to stay ahead – whatever life throws at you. This provides support for Bourdieu's contention that the various sources of advantage are readily convertible into each other. Indeed, the persistence of relative inequality has only been possible because of the relative ease with which the more privileged have been able to convert economic holdings into educational and cultural success. It is still the case that economic position can 'insure' against poor educational performance, and numerous studies show that low-achieving children from more privileged backgrounds have much better careers than their less-advantaged peers. So if advantaged children do not do well academically, alternative resources are used to ensure their success. But the link between social background and educational attainment has also strengthened over time. The more advantaged are dramatically more successful in educational terms, and this is true even when we hold measured 'ability'

constant. If there has been a loosening of the impact of family background on social position it has not been 'by degrees' – the educational route – since family background has been increasingly significant for educational success (Prandy *et al.* 2003b). Whether it is through living in better areas (with better schools), through the hiring of private tutors, through the choice of private schooling, through the possession of cultural capital, through the more strategic and confident negotiation of the school system, through the mobilisation of well-placed social contacts, or through the higher aspirations that privileged parents have for their children, or indeed through all of these factors – the fact remains that it is harder for privileged children to fail than it is for disadvantaged children to succeed. Education has not contributed to increased social mobility, but rather has served as a mechanism for social reproduction. But how is it that advantage reproduces itself?

Reproduction

It is a central tenet of stratification analysis that, by their nature, unequal social relations are

highly resistant to change: those groupings who enjoy positions of superior advantage and disadvantage cannot be expected to yield them up without a struggle, but will rather typically seek to exploit the resources they can command in order to preserve their superiority.

(Goldthorpe *et al.* 1980: 28)

Those with advantages are better placed to capitalise on them, and to seize new opportunities as they arise, than those with fewer resources. In this way, inequality is reproduced. However, opinions differ as to whether this is a process of primarily economic or cultural reproduction.

As we have seen, the central question of Bourdieu's work is 'how stratified social systems of hierarchy and domination persist and reproduce intergenerationally without powerful resistance and without the conscious recognition of their members' (Swartz 1997: 6). Bourdieu wishes to avoid determinism, insisting that actors are not simply following internalised rules, but rather are pursuing practical engagements and responding creatively to new situations (albeit in ways shaped by class predispositions). However, 'agents bring the properties of their location in a hierarchically structured social order into each and every situation and interaction' (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]: 44). Because individuals occupy specific locations their view of the social space is always partial. And the impact of social location on perception often occurs in implicit, taken-for-granted ways in which 'the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the world are internalized, "embodied" social structures' (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]: 468).

The categories of perception of the social world are, as regards their most essential features, the product of the internalization, the incorporation, of

the objective structures of social space. Consequently, they incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than to rebel against it, to counterpose to it different, even antagonistic, possibilities. The sense of one's place, as a sense of what one can or cannot 'permit oneself', implies a tacit acceptance of one's place, a sense of limits ('that's not for the likes of us') or, which amounts to the same thing – a sense of distances, to be marked and kept, respected or expected.

(Bourdieu 1985: 728)

As we have seen, Bourdieu's work emphasises the way in which the dominated in a structure of inequality accept their fate, and adjust their aspirations according to their position and thus, however unintentionally, help to reproduce their inequality by 'self-selecting' class-differentiated routes through life. But whilst hierarchy and inequality do create very different social contexts for social unequals, and thus shape lives with different tastes and interests, throughout the book I have shown that there is also a danger that cultural accounts of inequality can slip into 'culture of poverty' explanations. 'Culture of poverty' explanations characterise the disadvantaged as hopeless and helpless victims of circumstance, complicit in their own fate. There are twin dangers here, of both determinism and voluntarism: of on the one hand characterising the disadvantaged as simple reflections of their structural position, with little control over their own fates; and, on the other hand, of seeing inequality as the product of the choices that the disadvantaged themselves make, the result of their impoverished cultural life and contacts, and their 'poverty of aspiration'. The implication is that the disadvantaged condemn themselves.

A series of writers has questioned the implication of such arguments: that the adaptations that the less advantaged must – inevitably – make to their social location somehow mean that they cannot take up new and better social positions. For whilst it is important to recognise that unequal social relations do provide fewer opportunities and resources, and thus relatively less agency and control, for the disadvantaged, the fact remains that when opportunities have opened up they have been as quick to seize them as their social superiors. A 'sense of one's place' and limited cultural capital have not stopped increasing numbers of working-class children from seizing their chances in the expanding opportunities of the educational system and labour market in the second half of the twentieth century, for example.

The standard criticism of theories of the cultural reproduction of inequality, then, is that they explain too much. For the inequality of less advantaged groups in late modern societies consists not in their lack of access to opportunities, but in their differential rates of access. Take going to university. For critics like John Goldthorpe, the problem is not why working-class children do not go to university (they clearly do, and their numbers have dramatically increased over time), but rather why their rates of entry have kept pace with the expanding numbers from middle-class backgrounds. This, he suggests, depends not on cultural reproduction (which would lead to working-class exclusion), but on the *differential*

economic risks that unequally placed groups face in considering their options. Goldthorpe rejects Bourdieu's emphasis on the 'poverty of aspiration' amongst the working class, which he sees as a form of 'blaming the victim':

it need not be supposed that the tendency of children from working-class families to pursue in general less ambitious educational careers than children from service-class families derives from a 'poverty' of aspirations: the patterns of choice made could be more or less equivalent ones. It is simpler to assume that there is no systematic variation in levels of aspiration, or related values, among classes, and that variations in the courses of action that are actually taken arise from the fact that, in pursuing any given goal from different class origins, different 'social distances' will have to be traversed – or, as Boudon . . . more usefully puts it, differential opportunities and constraints, and thus the evaluation of differential sets of probable costs and benefits, will be involved.

(Goldthorpe 1996: 489–490)

Goldthorpe's argument is that going to university entails more risks for working-class children. Quite rationally, therefore, working-class individuals are less likely to choose such routes than middle-class individuals, not because of any difference in aspirations, or cultural know-how between them, but rather because the economic costs of failure are so much greater. The same choice – going to university – is more costly for lower-class individuals than it is for the more privileged, since the expenses are proportionately larger against lower-class incomes, and the risks of failure are greater compared to the sacrifices that will have to be undergone. Goldthorpe distinguishes 'strategies from above', in which the advantaged seek to maintain their position with ample resources, from 'strategies from below', in which the less advantaged face a more difficult route of advancement with limited resources (Goldthorpe 2000). Goldthorpe's argument is that 'cultural' differences are not necessary in the explanation of why expanding opportunities have not changed class differentials in access. The expansion of opportunities has not changed the relative risks, because social-class differences in family income remain, and it is these economic differences which are central to how actors make their choices (Scott 1996: 509).

Goldthorpe's argument insists on the primacy of economic resources in the reproduction of class differentials. The less advantaged always have a greater relative distance to travel to achieve the same goals. In aiming for the same goals the disadvantaged have to be *more ambitious* than the advantaged, who are simply aiming to maintain their social position. For Goldthorpe, it is the distance in structural location which explains the different choices made. However, the question is whether such 'distances' can be seen in purely economic terms, since the less advantaged also have to travel further in social and cultural terms to achieve 'middle-class' goals. As we have seen in Chapter 8, Goldthorpe's approach has been criticised by those advocating culturalist class analysis, because it ignores the way in which 'decision making depends on specific kinds of cultural framework' (Savage 2000: 86).

Culturalist theorists suggest the rather bloodless rational decision-making of Goldthorpe's theory needs to be put into broader social and cultural perspective. For example, research into education choices amongst young people suggests that 'cultural and social capital, material constraints . . . social perceptions and distinctions, and forms of self-exclusion . . . are all at work in the processes of choice' (Ball *et al.* 2002: 54):

decisions were pragmatic, rather than systematic. They were based on partial information located in the familiar and the known. The decision-making was context-related, and could not be separated from the family background, culture and life-histories of the [young people]. The decisions were opportunistic, being based on fortuitous contacts and experiences. [. . .] Decisions were only partially rational, being also influenced by feelings and emotions. Finally, decisions often involved accepting one option rather than choosing between many.

(Hodgkinson and Sparkes, quoted in Ball *et al.* 2002: 55)

There is considerable evidence that middle-class parents exhibit great anxiety over their children's futures, perceive the competition to be tough, and have little sense of the relatively straightforward 'reproduction of advantage' which objective middle-class mobility chances suggest (Power *et al.* 2003; Devine 2004; Ball *et al.* 2002). This suggests that aspirations and decision-making depend on local frameworks of reference and comparison. Middle-class children following advantaged routes still often feel like relative failures (for example, for going to a non-Oxbridge university) compared to their more successful peers (Power *et al.* 2003). So the very strategic educational interventions of the middle classes relate to fears of relative failure, and to the way in which aspirations emerge from social context.

There is a fundamental question, however, of the precise role that cultural differentiation plays in the reproduction of inequality; since cultural differences should not be seen solely in terms of social *values*, but rather as an aspect of how different social locations entail different practical engagements with the world. Culture should not be counterposed to material location, since cultural differentiation is part and parcel of the structured nature of social life.

Culture, social networks and reproduction

Bourdieu's central contribution has been to show that processes of lateral, 'cultural' differentiation are, in fact, bound up with vertical, hierarchical differentiation. Because the 'cultural' differences of people at the same level of the hierarchy are part of struggles over social and cultural distinction by which groups establish a position in the hierarchy. These processes of competition and differentiation occur as individuals try to mobilise various social, cultural and economic resources to maintain or improve their position. And – as Bourdieu notes – processes of competition are often at their most fierce between those at the same level of the hierarchy; that is, not between unequals, but rather

between broadly equivalent individuals who seek to find a competitive advantage through pursuing different social or cultural avenues.

One criticism of Bourdieu's relational approach is that it leads to a 'zero-sum' view of power in social hierarchies, in which one person's gain is inevitably another person's loss; where the respect or value of some (the middle classes) must be based on the denigration or devaluing of others (the working classes). Bourdieu's approach to social analysis is *relational*, and he rejects seeing social location in terms of the *content* of social positions or cultural practices, arguing that the meaning of any particular practice emerges out of the relations of opposition and proximity to other practices. Because Bourdieu believes that meaning is defined *relationally*, all cultural practices are 'automatically classified and classifying, rank-ordered and rank-ordering' (1984 [1979]: 223). As Lamont has noted, this implies that 'distinct preferences necessarily negate one another', that 'cultural differences automatically translate into domination . . . [and] by the mere fact of being defined in opposition to one another, generate hierarchies of meaning as well as discipline and repression' (Lamont 1992: 182, 177). Certainly, those at the bottom of hierarchies are often stigmatised, and seen not merely as subordinate but also of lower worth, but it is not clear that cultural differentiation can be seen quite so simply as the product of a dominant class imposing their values on the rest.

Social and cultural relations cannot be so neatly coupled into equations of gain or loss, and there is a danger of downplaying 'the possible significance of popular cultural resources, by only dealing with working-class identities as stigmatised ones' (Savage 2003: 541). For: 'In Bourdieu's frequently reductive account of social interests, the primary (often, it seems, the exclusive) function of possession of cultural capital is that of maintaining and extending social status' (Bennett *et al.* 1999: 263–264).

Critics point out that social and cultural practices have their own logic, independent of status competition. Not all forms of differentiation are strategies in hierarchical activities and forms of cultural difference can be pursued for their own sake, for the love of the thing itself. A love of opera, for example, is not always about indicating cultural distance from the unwashed masses. In the same way differential association can occur through restricted opportunities to meet unlike others, and through the comfort and familiarity of associating with those who are socially similar to us, not just through hierarchical competition.

Bourdieu's relational method . . . seems to presuppose a tightly coupled social order where contrastive practices are continuously operative and always hierarchical. It tends to downplay processes of imitation or cooperation that can also be formative of social identity as are processes of distinction.

(Swartz 1997: 64)

Forms of difference have their own dynamic, independent of processes of hierarchy. Differentiation occurs independently of hierarchical processes. For example, if we think of cultural 'taste':

Rather than displaying a singular structure of value running from the legitimate and prestigious to the illegitimate and valueless . . . cultural practices in all their heterogeneity are organised by different and often incommensurable scales. Watching the football on Saturday, playing beach cricket, growing giant pumpkins for the show, driving a stock car, walking a bush trail, doing voluntary work for a service club, playing bridge, gardening, working out, going to the movies or to a dance club. . . . each of these is diversely configured and specially valued in ways that do not sustain generalisation. . . . This is not to deny the importance of cultural capital in the formation and differentiation of social classes: clearly 'high'-cultural preferences and practices are important in the formation of the class of professionals, just as rock music is important in the definition of the working classes. All we want to argue is that these processes do not take place along a singular scale of cultural value, and that it is not possible to extrapolate effects of dominance from them. They have effects of cohesion in relation to any one class, but they do not necessarily have effects beyond that nexus of class and culture.

(Bennett *et al.* 1999: 263, 268)

The implication of this is that cultural tastes and preferences are primarily bound up with stratification, not through the imposition of a dominant group's values, but rather through their role in processes of differential association in which groups have *different* tastes and values. So that

cultural judgement has its primary effect through its capacity to solidify and entrench social networks. It is by achieving communicative competence with others in a similar social position that the possibility of exchanging or transforming cultural capital into economic capital or social power is realised.

(Warde *et al.* 1999: 124)

Erickson (1996), who has pointed to Bourdieu's relative neglect of the role of social capital in the formation and differentiation of social groups, argues that social networks play a stronger role in the maintenance of social position than does the possession of cultural capital. Because cultural differentiation is a feature of differential association, it is part and parcel of the wider role social networks play in maintaining and reproducing stratification.

As this book has demonstrated, a series of relational approaches to stratification has shown that differential association is crucial as both an effect and also a cause of stratification. The reproduction of hierarchy is about more than the intergenerational transmission of advantage, since it is also bound up in how people in different social locations with different social and cultural resources also tend to make very different marriage and friendship choices. Whom we fall in love and settle down with, and the friends and social contacts that we make throughout our life, are all affected by our hierarchical position. We connect to a range of different sorts of people, directly and indirectly, through complex *networks* of relations. Since social characteristics (class, gender, race, etc.) are

systematically embedded in these social networks, the people closest to us also tend to be socially similar to us, along a range of characteristics.

Our social networks are therefore patterned in a hierarchical manner (along lines of class and status, but also along lines of race, ethnicity, and so on). But what this means is that people's disagreements (about who and what they value) can – if they disagree consistently – be the basis of a hierarchy of practices, and of differentiated social networks, without there being a common hierarchy of values. But the network of social relationships and affiliations within which each individual sits affects their access to resources, opportunities, and so on. Since networks are strongly affected by differential association and social similarity, overall they create a pattern of highly unequal social relations which structure differential access to resources, information, people and places. But since the most ordinary and everyday of social activities reflect people's location in unequal social relations, this also means that – *simply by going about their everyday social routines* – people's practical social activities help to reproduce those unequal relations.

It is apparent that hierarchy is a process of both distance and differentiation in social relations. Those distant in the hierarchy lead different lives in different locations, with different friends and interests, and this social dissimilarity is bound up with unequal levels of resources, respect and social control. So the mundane, everyday activities of all our social lives – going to work, spending time with our friends, pursuing hobbies and interests, socialising with our family – both reflect and help to reproduce differences in social position and resources.

The continuity of social structure is itself produced by myriad individual decisions and actions. Most people who decide whether or not to take a school exam or aim for promotion for work are not consciously reproducing the class system: they are doing what seems best to them at the time. Similarly most people lighting up a cigarette or going out jogging are not aiming to reproduce the pattern of health inequality.

(Bartley *et al.* 1998: 6)

The separation in people's intimate contacts has sometimes been seen as a sign of group boundaries and social closure. However, whilst group boundaries and social exclusion are an important aspect of differential association, patterns of social distance also occur in much less 'bounded' social networks, and through people following stratified social routes and routines through life. The analysis of differential association shows that the intimate choices we make in life (of friends and partners) are constrained by the social sorting that already occurs in the clubs, schools, workplaces, and neighbourhoods in which we live our lives. This is a key feature of stratification – it leads to social distance in our personal relations. Since differential association is routinely embedded in social arrangements, social distance can occur without any requirement for strategies limiting contact or denying access to privileged circles. People differently located in social space experience different routes through life, and so often develop differences in taste

and manners. Such differences are very often employed in strategies of exclusion and in the erection of social barriers, but it is also important to recognise the way in which social distance is routinely and unintentionally reproduced, through the most everyday of social actions. Whether we wish to or not, we all routinely reproduce hierarchy and social distance 'behind our backs'.

However, no form of differentiation is innocent of hierarchical implications. Cultural and social differences can be, and frequently are, used opportunistically in strategies of exclusion, ranking and subordination. Relations of difference can become ascribed as forms of superiority and inferiority and, although this is always a contested process, the conversion of markers of difference into markers of hierarchy is commonplace. Therefore differential association can be the basis on which boundary drawing, and perceptions of difference, can emerge and harden. And vice versa, perceptions of difference, however stereotypical, can reinforce social distances, reproduce inequalities, enforce social isolation, and thus produce differential association.

Stratification, therefore, is a practical accomplishment of everyday life, whether we intend it or not. Inequality, for Bourdieu, exists in its most fundamental form in implicit, common-sense ways of seeing the world, generating a 'matrix of perception' (Lamont 1992: 187) which extends well beyond conscious reflection or identity. It is one of his central insights that inequality and social distance are reproduced in everyday, routine activities, in which knowledge of or attitudes towards inequality or the stratification order are entirely irrelevant. People – simply by liking the things and people they like – cannot help but reproduce the stratification order, regardless of what they know or think about inequality.

However, Bourdieu also slips into a more voluntaristic account, in which the reproduction of inequality is based on false consciousness and shared cultural values. Here people are ignorant of the 'true' nature of power and share the values that condemn them to social inferiority. Bourdieu's work is important for showing that social control does not have to depend upon overt conflict or physical coercion, and that taken-for-granted social relations help to reproduce hierarchy and inequality. But a concern for critics has been the way in which Bourdieu sees the stability of inequality in processes of misrecognition and 'symbolic violence' in which the dominated come to *accept* the conditions of their own inequality as fair and just. This neglects the importance of sheer economic clout and the role of coercion and collective or organised class struggle as features of *contested* power relations (Jenkins 2000; Swartz 1997), and overestimates the importance of symbolic legitimisation in maintaining the stability of power inequalities. Bourdieu argues that 'genuine scientific research embodies a threat to the "social order"' (Bourdieu and Hahn, quoted in Swartz 1997: 260) because of the way in which it unmasks hidden power relations. This implies that if people saw their true social position then inequality could not persist. Yet, as Swartz argues, this 'overstates the role that false consciousness has in maintaining groups in subordinate positions' since 'individuals and groups often see clearly the arbitrary character of power relations but lack the requisite resources to change them' (Swartz 1997: 289).

There is a danger of voluntarism, of assuming that the stability of inequality rests on the consent and acceptance of those involved. In voluntaristic accounts it is assumed that 'the lack of agitation for change on the part of the deprived has to be based upon either a moral consensus or upon some form of ignorance of true social processes. Their consciousness has been characterised as either limited or fragmented or false' (Stewart *et al.* 1980: 143–144). However:

All these approaches separate the individual from the social system and argue as if the free consideration of social arrangements and consequent moral judgements of them was a significant human problem. We believe, on the contrary, that most aspects of social life are, generally, seen to lie beyond the competence of any identifiable social group or individual to change. They are, for most people, facts of existence determined by an impersonal social system.

(Stewart and Blackburn 1975: 481–482)

The coherence and stability of the stratification order need not reside in shared values, nor in ignorance of inequality or power relations. For,

whether or not there is a true level of analysis concerned with the 'social' as a world distinct from the 'individual', the social is experienced as if it occupied a separate realm. . . . There are important consequences for individual consciousness when society in certain of its aspects is confronted as 'natural', as residing in the operation of general principles external to individuals and therefore descriptively known, rather than in norms or values which are prescriptive or contingent. Attitudes to social arrangements then become questions of knowledge rather than of evaluation.

(Stewart *et al.* 1980: 7)

The Cambridge school emphasise that 'Individual actions are not usually oriented towards the reproduction of the stratification order, and their effects on its reproduction are not necessarily foreseeable' (Blackburn and Prandy 1997: 503). Because the hierarchical social order is reproduced through routine, everyday actions, people may not intend, or even be consciously aware of, the consequences of their actions: social distance is *reproduced* in such simple actions as our choice of friends and marriage partners, or our cultural tastes and preferences. The reproduction of hierarchy is carried out every day, by every one of us, simply by going about our daily lives (Bottero and Prandy 2003). In this way, power and inequality are reproduced through daily routine activities:

Social advantage is maintained, not by the personal competence of individuals in conscious control of decision-making processes, but rather by the exercise of ordinary rights and privileges which accrue to positions in the social structure. Within relatively stable systems individuals will usually experience power in situations where they can successfully resist attempts to

erode their customary privileges – to change the nature of social arrangements. To a large extent this power becomes visible only when challenged. Their ability to initiate change in the social structure is a great deal more limited. They are not free to determine the nature of the system. The differential distribution of power in a society is, then, integral to the everyday experience of its members. For the majority of the population this is essentially a structure of external constraint, both in terms of the quality of their social relationships and their relationships with the material world. The nature and extent of the constraints varies with position in this structure, and on this depends the quality of life. Though they cannot determine the nature of the structure, the privileged have greater freedom to choose their position within the structure.

(Stewart and Blackburn 1975: 483–484)

Conclusion

It is certainly the case that patterns of inequality are very complexly structured, and that unequal social relations are fluid, and highly differentiated. What we find are relative *degrees* of inequality, differential but overlapping and multiplex *patterns* of association, uneven *chances* of success; different *rates* of movement. Of course, the persistence of inequality in unequal patterns of access to opportunities even as those opportunities expand is a form of inequality that is sometimes hard to see. It has been noted that relative inequality often appears ‘counter-intuitive’ to the people who experience it (Devine 2004); certainly it is beyond the intuition of those eminent commentators who have pronounced the death of stratification. But differential association and movement still amount to substantial and enduring inequality, in which people’s social relations continue to order their chances in life, and thus provide the basis for patterned choices. Fluid change may be a characteristic of late modern societies, so that ‘all that is solid melts into air’, yet within these restless movements patterned inequality endures. The complexity of stratification does not mean that the coherence of social divisions and inequalities has been undermined or that progressive individualisation has led to chaotic, unstructured social relations. Choice cannot be counterposed to social location, movement cannot be counterposed to structure, and hyper-differentiation cannot be counterposed to the orderly and patterned nature of social relations, since choice, movement, and complex differentiation are essential aspects of stratification.

The complex and uneven differentiation of social relations does mean that the relation between social relations and social identities is not straightforward. But if symbolic identities cannot be ‘read off’ from social relations, because of the complex nature of networks of differential association and affiliation, this does not mean that the mobilisation of identities is disconnected from the underlying orderliness of patterned social relations. Differential association occurs in diverse ways, as stratified social relations mean that people follow different routes through life. Many of these processes arise through the structured opportunities

for association that stratification generates, and do not directly arise from the perception of difference, or from symbolic demarcation. However, differential association – and the different social worlds this gives rise to – shape and are shaped by unspoken, implicit, or background social ‘identities’, expressed through the patterning of our practical social relations, resources and lifestyles. And such differences help to explain how symbolic boundaries and collectivised identities rise, and fall. But above all, stratification resides in the everyday practices of lives lived in unequal locations, in which social difference and social distance intertwine.