How Social Resistance is Generated when Social Mobility is Obstructed: A Process-Tracing Study of the 2012-2023 Strike Movement in the UK

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Abstract. The UK strike was one of Europe's most extensive and topical social protests in the last decade. Only a little attention has been paid to it in sociology, as perspectives on contemporary society are not popular in academia. To fill this gap, we will use historical, sociological methods to theoretically reconstruct the social structure of the British strike movement and restore its historical-social processes. The relationship between strikes and social mobility in Britain is the subject of this thesis, and it is found that the relationship between social mobility and social resistance is not linear. Instead, it is structured as a 'double helix.' Social resistance does not necessarily begin with a decrease in social mobility, but it does impact the current state of social mobility. Indicators of mobility will be one of the resistance issues, and the official method of counting them is subject to further academic debate and research.

Keywords: social resistance; social mobility; working class; process-tracing.

1. Introduction

Contemporary British society is grappling with a noticeable decline in social class mobility. This decline, exacerbated by the global pandemic's disruption within the neo-liberal globalized market, resembles historical analogs, such as the gold rushes, where individuals fervently sought social mobility. However, as with real gold, social mobility is not isolated; it is intricately woven into historical and societal contexts. In this study, we adopt the analytical paradigm of Historical Sociology to explore this interplay between social mobility and historical context. Historical Sociology posits that social phenomena, including social mobility and labor strikes, can only be fully comprehended by considering their historical settings. This approach acknowledges that historical contingencies and structural changes play pivotal roles in shaping social dynamics. Thus, we employ Historical Sociology to examine the historical context of contemporary issues of social mobility and labor strikes.

Historically, labor strikes have been a primary means for workers to contest social injustices, with a tradition dating back to the post-World War II era. Our research focuses on the pivotal decade from 2011 to 2021, marked by the world's gradual recovery from a global financial crisis. In 2023, amid ongoing global economic recovery, we scrutinize the choices made by individuals facing analogous circumstances.

Contemporary strike research often relies on quantitative analyses, examining strike frequency and geographic distribution through extensive datasets. While quantitative analysis offers valuable insights, it sometimes overlooks the primary purpose of strike research: illuminating social change through the existence of labor strikes. Thus, our study seeks to balance quantitative analysis with a qualitative exploration of social dynamics grounded in Historical Sociology. Our primary objective is to investigate working-class resistance dynamics amid declining social mobility. We have compiled a dataset covering strike events in specific UK regions from 2011 to 2021, augmented with contextual scenarios for each year. We aim to analyze the intricate interplay between strikes and social mobility within the framework of Historical Sociology.
Our research methodology embraces the process-tracing approach, inherently tied to Historical Sociology. This method involves in-depth case studies to uncover causal mechanisms. We will closely examine major strike events from 2011 to 2021, focusing on the 2011 Public Sector Strike in the UK. This analysis will consider factors influencing social mobility in the UK leading up to these strikes, offering a nuanced understanding rooted in historical context. We aim to establish connections between social mobility and social action and delineate the comprehensive causal pathway from the independent variable (social mobility and its components) to the outcome (social action) [1, 2].

In summary, our research analyzes the evolution of strike activity intensity in the UK and explores social mobility facets within the framework of Historical Sociology. These analyses will be grounded in Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical insights into different forms of capital. Consequently, our study will discuss statistical findings and construct a model explaining the intricate relationship between social mobility and social action within a historical context. Notably, this study addresses a significant research gap, as there has yet to be any prior investigation into the correlation between social mobility and social movements using the process-tracing methodology within the analytical paradigm of Historical Sociology. This research holds the potential to contribute significantly to academic understanding by providing a comprehensive historical explanation of this correlation. Furthermore, it offers practical value for government agencies seeking to forecast social movements in light of anticipated limitations on social mobility, thus allowing for informed preparations to mitigate potential social unrest.

2. Literature Review

Social mobility has held significant importance in sociological research in the decades following World War II. It has evolved through the contributions of various scholars, each offering unique perspectives on this subject. Two distinct schools of thought have emerged, each emphasizing different aspects of social mobility.

One school, primarily led by American scholars, advocates for a comprehensive analysis of social mobility using data and statistical approaches. They view social mobility as intricately linked to statistics and empirical evidence rather than theoretical speculation. In contrast, the other school, dominated by Marxist and left-wing thinkers, expresses concerns about an excessive focus on social mobility, overshadowing class conflict [3]. They argue that an overemphasis on mobility can neglect the pressing issues of class struggle and even suggest a fear of ideological conflict. A minority perspective within this school sees the study of social mobility as a way of ignoring the exploitation of workers by capitalism. Valid points exist within both these viewpoints [4]. Social mobility should be examined from quantitative and qualitative angles, acknowledging its practical implications. In an age of digitization, sociological research should transcend pure theoretical discourse. Nonetheless, it is vital to maintain academic neutrality, drawing from diverse theories, including Marxist and liberal perspectives, while acknowledging that the research topic may influence sociological preferences.

Historically, Karl Marx was a prominent figure among early sociologists who delved into social mobility and strikes. Marx recognized the significance of strikes for the working class to combat bourgeois stability. He noted, "In England, the workers... build regular alliances, the TUC, which serves as a bulwark for the workers' struggle against the entrepreneurs" [5]. Marx was critical of his predecessors in political science and economics for their need for more clarity when discussing strikes and alliances as integral components of forming the working class.

Following Marx, scholars like Pitirim Sorokin contributed to studying social mobility and strikes. Sorokin defined social mobility as "the movement of an individual, or a social group, from one social position to another" [6]. He argued that strikes arose due to social mobility but criticized them as disruptive to social harmony. He considered strikes products of "narrow proletarian psychology and ideology" that hindered upward mobility, ultimately leading to societal collapse.

While traditional sociologists analyzed social mobility extensively, they often remained within the confines of the asset-proletariat model, failing to establish a direct connection between social mobility
and the causes of strikes. John H. Goldthorpe introduced a model known as the Class Classification Framework (EGP), categorizing British society into six classes based on occupation [7]. However, Goldthorpe focused predominantly on the macroscopic structure of British society, overlooking the relationship between social mobility and strikes [8].

Recent research from the Great British Class Survey (GBCS) applied Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and economic capital, highlighting the vulnerability of the "Precariat" to strike behavior. This suggests a connection between class separation and strikes, contributing to class solidification. Duncan Exley's work, "The End of Aspiration?" emphasizes the link between housing and strikes. He argues that housing insecurity, exacerbated by limited earning opportunities for working-class individuals, fosters a climate of fear and social unrest, fueling strikes [9]. Exley's perspective paints a stagnant societal landscape where class divisions persist.

In conclusion, this literature review establishes the importance of understanding the intricate relationship between social mobility and strike behavior. We acknowledge the need for quantitative data and theoretical analysis to study this phenomenon comprehensively. While some scholars emphasize the concept of "openness" in social mobility, we recognize the ideological diversity surrounding this idea. Our research builds upon previous theories, including the Kerr-Siegel Hypothesis, to explore the factors influencing strike rates, such as the nature of work and geographical context [10]. Ultimately, we aim to offer a more objective and comprehensive understanding of modern society's dynamic link between mobility and strikes.

3. Class Mobility and Workers' Strikes in British Society

This essay will define social mobility as changes in structural social status, which involve three dimensions based on one determinant--Capital. As Pierre Bourdieu argued, the accumulation and inheritance of economic, cultural, and social capital are the original causes of the differences between classes that we can observe today [11].

On one hand, the occupation structure of a society only composes a fraction of the economic capital possessed by different classes. Factors such as living costs, wages, and wealth would, therefore, have more weight in determining one’s social status by determining the amount of economic capital one may possess.

![Fig.1 Wealth Distribution in the UK up to 2020](Source: Office for National Statistics)
As illustrated in Fig. 1 and Table 1, in the UK, the inequality gap in the distribution of wealth declined and widened from 2014 to 2020. In 2014, those in the top 20% of wealth distribution possessed 46.9% of the total wealth, whereas, at the end of 2020, only the wealthiest 20% of the population had 68.4% of the natural wealth. This was an increase of 21.5%, which indicates that the inequality in the ownership of economic capital within the UK had grown significantly, which suggests that in the last decade, the chances for the working class to gain access to wealth such as real estate became more unreachable. However, the existing owners of assets experienced a growth in their wealth significantly on the premise that the UK economy in this period experienced a recession of 11.7% reduction in GDP. Hence, it would be likely for this paper to suggest that the increase in their wealth was not the result of national economic growth but the redistribution of wealth within the country towards the upper class. Thus, in this aspect, social mobility in the UK would have remained the same but declined. Working-class.

Furthermore, as Bourdieu suggested in his concept of cultural capital, education functions vitally as a means to the inter-generational reproduction of cultural capital. Therefore, this study would depict education opportunities for different classes to investigate the distribution of cultural capital among the British working class [12]. Private Education Policy Forum suggested that children from managerial and professional backgrounds made up around 77% from 2004 to 2014, while children from manual occupations only accounted for 5%. However, in the UK, the private education sector typically outperforms the public sector regarding achievements in exams and future careers. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that working-class children have yet to be given equal education opportunities; thus, they tend to be disadvantaged by the current education system. This would create a worsened situation for improving social mobility in the foreseeable future.

![Data on UK employees who are trade union members](image)

**Fig.2** Data on UK employees who are trade union members
Source: Administrative data on union membership from the Department for Employment (1892-1973) and the Certification Office (1974-2021). Data on UK employees who are trade union members is based on the Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics.

With Fig.2, we can quickly notice that the number of guild members has gradually declined from 1995 to 2022. This represents that traditional trade unions are finding it harder and harder to influence
groups of workers who are no longer inclined to join trade unions in organized resistance. This can also be seen in the graph below.

![Fig. 3 Trade Union Density by Occupation and Gender](image)

Source: Labour Force Survey, Office for National Statistics

The number of traditional manual workers (predominantly men) is decreasing. This means that union membership, in general, is also declining. Workers have constantly been the mainstream of society. Their upward mobility has been blocked, and traditional trade unions have yet to be able to secure their interests. And methods of opposition, such as strikes, have gradually lost their utility. As a place to organize working class resistance, the trade union is slowly losing its effectiveness. This fact is beyond doubt in modern times. Similarly, it is becoming increasingly easier for workers to organize formal acts of resistance, such as strikes in such circumstances, whereas wild-cat strikes are useless for social mobility.

4. How Social Class Mobility Affects Workers' Strikes in Britain

4.1. Economic Factors

In 2011, strikes, predominantly in the public sector, were a repercussion of the 2008 financial crisis. The unemployment rate peaked 8.5 percent between September and November, marking a 15-year high. Over this period, the public sector witnessed a 15-year peak in working days lost due to strikes, totaling 963,000 days (refer to Fig. 4 and Fig. 5) [13].

While job markets remained saturated and unemployment rates gradually improved due to economic recovery and the waning impact of the financial crisis, upward mobility for the working class remained elusive [14].

![Fig. 4. Unemployment rate for aged 16 and older](image)

Source: Office for National Statistics
Fig. 5 Working Days Lost due to strike action in the public sector
Source: Office for National Statistics

4.2. Economic Capital

Goldthorpe's class model sets the stage for measuring mobility, yet these occupational categories may need more distinction at higher social hierarchy levels. As Savage aptly puts it, they can "distinguish between the hills and the plain, but not between the highest mountains of the range" (Savage 191). Economic capital analysis, a crucial determinant, has been largely absent in traditional studies, overshadowed by economic and occupational factors. Class formation transcends the purely economic or occupational dimensions, with capital and its subsidiary forms significantly contributing to social reproduction. Consequently, strikes can't be viewed purely as financial conflicts; they possess a distinctive cultural character.

Exploring social mobility through occupational lenses fails to explain the root causes of strikes. Even when mobility remains relatively stable, conflicts persist. Class differentiation and antagonism have been overlooked but stay pertinent. As indicated in Table 2, the British elite primarily originates from Class 1 (senior managers or traditional professionals), with 51% having parents in this class. For those outside the Precariat, this figure stands at 11%. Though 11% of the elite rose from less privileged backgrounds, their class origins still need to be higher, requiring no substantial ascent [15]. Post-pandemic era volatility has resurfaced despite a decline in strikes and a gradual decrease in unemployment since 2011. The enduring structural inequality and economic distress continue to fuel general strikes, effectively stalling relative social mobility [16]. As the elite class adapts and secures advantages, the lower classes bear the brunt of crisis risks. Table 3 emphasizes the conspicuous "class pay gap," showcasing economic capital's increasing concentration and reduced decentralization, particularly in affluent occupations.
### Table 2. Main Parental Income-Earner’s Occupational Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GBCS Classes</th>
<th>Class 1: Senior Managerial or Traditional Professional</th>
<th>Class 2: Middle Managerial or Modern Professional</th>
<th>Classes 3-5: Intermediate or Technical Workers</th>
<th>Classes 6-7: Manual Workers or Never Worked</th>
<th>Total Number of Respondents (in brackets shows from GBCS)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elite</td>
<td>51(55)</td>
<td>11(26)</td>
<td>28(13)</td>
<td>11(7)</td>
<td>61(35,288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established middle class</td>
<td>39(35)</td>
<td>11(34)</td>
<td>31(20)</td>
<td>19(11)</td>
<td>252(69,917)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New affluent workers</td>
<td>18(16)</td>
<td>8(28)</td>
<td>33(31)</td>
<td>41(24)</td>
<td>169(9,297)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical middle class</td>
<td>42(37)</td>
<td>6(33)</td>
<td>15(18)</td>
<td>38(11)</td>
<td>57(15,382)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional working class</td>
<td>16(23)</td>
<td>9(26)</td>
<td>27(30)</td>
<td>47(22)</td>
<td>131(2,622)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging service workers</td>
<td>21(28)</td>
<td>9(33)</td>
<td>28(23)</td>
<td>43(17)</td>
<td>205(27,780)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precariat population as a whole from different backgrounds</td>
<td>4(13)</td>
<td>4(20)</td>
<td>27(28)</td>
<td>65(40)</td>
<td>151(1,114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25(37)</td>
<td>8(31)</td>
<td>28(20)</td>
<td>38(12)</td>
<td>1,026(161,400)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3. Family of Origin and Current Salary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational Group</th>
<th>Senior Managerial and Traditional Professional</th>
<th>Middle Managerial and Modern Professional</th>
<th>Intermediate and Technical Workers</th>
<th>Manual and Never Worked</th>
<th>Average for All in These Elite Occupations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scientists</td>
<td>50,790</td>
<td>45,740</td>
<td>46,832</td>
<td>44,179</td>
<td>47,928</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineers</td>
<td>55,066</td>
<td>49,678</td>
<td>47,648</td>
<td>47,554</td>
<td>51,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Professionals</td>
<td>61,899</td>
<td>53,770</td>
<td>50,301</td>
<td>50,462</td>
<td>55,296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors</td>
<td>80,226</td>
<td>78,925</td>
<td>68,840</td>
<td>74,915</td>
<td>78,221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other medical Professionals</td>
<td>60,617</td>
<td>57,266</td>
<td>60,262</td>
<td>53,929</td>
<td>58,924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-education Teachers</td>
<td>68,264</td>
<td>61,534</td>
<td>57,553</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>62,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Professionals</td>
<td>60,324</td>
<td>57,012</td>
<td>56,207</td>
<td>56,989</td>
<td>57,001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers, Barristers, judges</td>
<td>86,363</td>
<td>75,273</td>
<td>67,450</td>
<td>65,583</td>
<td>79,436</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public sectors(outside health)</td>
<td>57,946</td>
<td>50,131</td>
<td>52,810</td>
<td>49,341</td>
<td>53,163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants CEOs, directors, presidents</td>
<td>63,848</td>
<td>57,237</td>
<td>52,009</td>
<td>52,990</td>
<td>59,118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other senior business people</td>
<td>101,052</td>
<td>87,751</td>
<td>84,006</td>
<td>83,467</td>
<td>93,881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial intermediaries</td>
<td>68,668</td>
<td>61,081</td>
<td>57,437</td>
<td>56,678</td>
<td>63,233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>journalists</td>
<td>84,797</td>
<td>68,843</td>
<td>60,942</td>
<td>60,767</td>
<td>74,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other NS-SEC 1 occupations</td>
<td>53,876</td>
<td>48,958</td>
<td>46,102</td>
<td>46,895</td>
<td>50,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>59,417</td>
<td>51,678</td>
<td>51,306</td>
<td>49,411</td>
<td>54,738</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3. Cultural and Social Capital

Conventional class structure models overemphasize occupational relationships, often neglecting wealth capital's intricate interplay. We prefer to adopt Mike Savage's model, which synthesizes Bourdieu's cultural capital and social capital with two central pillars: social capital and cultural capital [11].

Social capital functions as a reciprocal benefit within privileged classes, influencing wealth capital and class mobility. Adequate social capital becomes a prerequisite for class mobility, allowing individuals to gain recognition within upper-class circles, effectively becoming part of the "upper class." Such social dynamics are conspicuously absent among the working class. Even if they amass substantial wealth capital (an unlikely scenario), their absence of social capital bars them from entering the upper echelons. This shortfall extends to cultural capital, manifested in the working class's limited engagement with high cultures, such as classical music or art museums. This deficit in cultural capital also hinders social mobility, making it challenging for workers to engage in "high culture" and receive social recognition [11]. In summary, the absence of both social and cultural capital complicates the working class's ascent to the actual "upper class" and higher societal positions, leading them to seek alternative paths to attain elevated status.

5. The Essential Logic of Class Mobility That Empowers Social Resistance

Social resistance, a protest by the proletariat, encompasses a broader revolt against the existing social order, extending beyond strikes. Tilly and Tarrow's classification characterizes social resistance as a subset of contentious politics, marked by three key traits: 1. it impacts others' interests, 2. it is recurrent and public, and 3. it often targets or involves the government. When analyzing strikes through this lens, we find a seamless fit within this framework. Strikes entail a loss of social wealth and an institution shutdown, affecting profits for those not participating. They are recurrent public events with protesters gathering and confronting government offices, often making the government a target – aligning precisely with the concept of social resistance.

Sociologists concur that strikes manifest when class mobility faces obstacles intertwined with workers' class identity and belonging. However, there's no definitive definition for these obstacles regarding class or social mobility [18]. Strikes are often perceived as a last resort, occurring when workers can barely survive or maintain minimal living standards, and they identify themselves within the working class. E.P. Thompson's theory portrays British workers as having a strong cultural connection to their class identity, defending class interests even in less pressing situations. Historical examples of early workers' associations in England corroborate this perspective. Thus, British workers sometimes waited until conditions became dire to resist [19].

Paul Willis's study of working-class high school students supports E.P. Thompson's point that working-class identity precedes high school student identity. This suggests that working-class children already possess a sense of belonging to their class before adulthood [20]. Hence, class identity and belonging aren't solely triggered by obstacles to class mobility, as some sociologists suggest.

What motivates strikes if class identity and belonging aren't directly tied to mobility impediments? Many contemporary sociologists assert that reduced social mobility, or class mobility blockage, is the primary catalyst for strikes. Yet, there's no direct link between these two factors. Some theories have attempted to correlate the number of strikes with social mobility data for the same year but yielded inconclusive results. Consequently, some theorists broaden their scope to encompass all social resistance within a vast theory. However, can social resistance genuinely be considered a product of social mobility?

Not necessarily. Olson's "collective action theory" perceives social resistance as dissatisfaction with a minority controlling a majority of resources within a collective. While this theory appears to align with class mobility blockage, it fundamentally differs. Olson views social resistance as a response to dissatisfaction with the system, likely ceasing once the organization can offer sufficient
resources [21]. Social resistance may transform into professionalized resistance, funded and staffed by established social organizations. This extension highlights that social resistance isn't solely linked to class mobility blockage but can also result from organizational influence. This aligns with the gradual professionalization and institutionalization of strikes in modern Britain.

The evidence suggests that class mobility blockage isn't a primary driver of social resistance. In other words, addressing social resistance doesn't solely hinge on reducing class mobility. Even in societies with high social mobility, social resistance persists.

6. Conclusion

The social structure of strikes, a prevalent and traditional form of social protest in British society, is primarily economic and political. Economically, it is tied to wealth distribution and mirrors social mobility indicators. Over the last decade, wealth distribution in the UK has stabilized but remains significantly unequal, leading to social tensions. The political shift of the Labour Party and the decline of trade unions have prompted workers to act individually rather than conform to social regulations and fight within established norms. Wildcat strikes are still suppressed, and spontaneous worker protests are unrecognized outside the social system. The frequency of strikes fluctuates with economic conditions, but financial capital remains concentrated among the upper classes. Cultural capital, where the upper classes shape social consciousness, indirectly links class identity and social mobility. Consuming similar cultural products blurs class boundaries and facilitates class mobility as the ideological state apparatus operates, connecting the reproduction of social capital. Class identities are not inherently linked to social mobility; somewhat, their interplay is shaped by the mechanisms of triple money. Identity is a manufactured concept, and social resistance stemming from it remains passive, either within regulatory bounds or irrational when not "manufactured." This regulatory process has led to the specialization and institutionalization of strike protests in Britain, making them less exceptional or subversive. The Kerr-Siegel Hypothesis is only partially justifiable in analyzing the English working class, as they are normalized, not marginalized, in society. Analyzing data on economic capital reveals that overall inequality in British society has remained consistently severe since 2011. Economic, social, and cultural wealth are highly concentrated in the upper class, keeping the working class disadvantaged within the socio-economic structure. They become risk-takers during financial crises, unable to achieve upward mobility in daily production. Strikes have normalized as relatively harmless social conflicts within the workings of the British political system, with wildcat strikes nearly disappearing. Trade unions have shifted from being safe spaces to becoming social institutions for maintaining social safety. The relationship between strikes and social mobility becomes complex due to these structural changes, forming a "double helix" where fluctuations in social mobility trigger strikes, but strikes themselves don't cause changes in social mobility. The English working class's status has mostly stayed the same over the study period, consistently residing at the lower end of the social scale.

This thesis reintroduces macro-analysis through classical theory and the historiographical aspects of sociology into the discourse, complementing sociological macro-historical analyses of social resistance in contemporary British society. The ethnographic method remains vital in sociological studies, given the challenges of accessing firsthand accounts and experiencing the lives of British workers today.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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