

**Západočeská univerzita v Plzni**

**Fakulta pedagogická**

**Katedra anglického jazyka**

**Bakalářská práce**

**SOCIÁLNÍ TŘÍDY V DNEŠNÍ VELKÉ BRITÁNII**

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**Plzeň 2019**

**University of West Bohemia**

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**Undegraduate Thesis**

**SOCIAL CLASSES IN GREAT BRITAIN TODAY**

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**Plzeň 2019**

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*V Plzni dne 24. dubna 2019*

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Nikola Volrábová

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor Bc. et Mgr. Andrew Tollet, M. Litt. for his guidance, time and useful comments. I shall not forget my friends, namely Lucie, Zuzana, Aled, Phillip and Martin, who spread my questionnaire amongst their British friends and family.

## ABSTRACT

Volrábová, Nikola. University of West Bohemia. April, 2019. Social classes in today's Great Britain. Supervisor: Bc. et Mgr. Andrew Tollet, M. Litt.

This undergraduate thesis deals with social classes in contemporary Britain. It looks at the historical development of classes in Britain and describes the traditional classification based on three main social classes – upper, middle and working. Finally, it examines different views on classes held by the British.

The theoretical part begins with defining the term *social class*. Following is the historical development describing how perceptions of classes and society in general had been changing throughout the history. Then I look at different approaches of classifying classes, and describe the traditional classification in more detail.

The practical part is focused on discovering people's attitudes towards classes and their opinion on them. To complete the goal of research, I conducted a short questionnaire and collected seventy-two answers. The results show that people's opinions often differ; however, there is usually one predominant opinion. A majority of respondents agreed that British society is shaped by the traditional classification. Most of them also marked income and occupation as the most liable determinants of one's class. In addition, a third of the respondents expressed their experience with being judged because of their social class.

*Keywords:* social, classes, Britain, British, United Kingdom, contemporary, culture, sociology, working, Thatcherism, research, questionnaire,

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Social classes are inherently associated with British culture just like a Sunday roast dinner, saying sorry or drinking tea. Throughout the last three centuries that classes have been evident in society on the British Isles, classes have been talked about, criticized, diminished, perceptions of them have been changed frequently, they have been the subject of many studies, and there have been talks of class wars. British society has slowly developed from a hierarchy to a three-layered society based on three main classes – upper, middle, and working class. However, this is only the most widespread perception of today's British society; many people, including the sociology experts, believe the division is held between the rich and the poor, or that there is no social division as such anymore. Alongside various perceptions of the British class system, the British inhabitants also have different views and attitudes towards classes. Those differences are one of the main aims of this thesis.

The first goal of the thesis is to cover the historical development of the class system, including the changes that happened during the era of Margaret Thatcher. Secondly, there will be a brief description of different class classifications, and a more thorough description of the traditional classification which is the classification I chose to focus on in the thesis. Thirdly, I would like to conduct research on the differences of views and opinions on British social classes held by the British public. A short questionnaire will be conducted for the purposes of research.

The Theoretical background chapter starts with different definitions of the term *social class*. Following is a section focused on the historical development; that is further divided into more sections according to centuries. Additionally, there is a section that centres around Thatcherism and its effects on social classes. Next are descriptions of different class classifications, followed by a description of the traditional classification into upper, middle and working class. This description takes into account various aspects like occupation, language differences, housing or leisure activities.

The practical part starts with the Methodology chapter. It explains the aim of research and describes the questionnaire. Furthermore, it characterizes the research sample.



Next is the Results and commentary chapter. This chapter presents the results of the questionnaire. There is a commentary to the results of each question; additionally, there are graphs that visually represent each question.

Lastly comes the Conclusion. It summarizes the main focus of the thesis, as well as the results of research.

## 2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Definition of class

First, I would like to state that there is no generally accepted definition of class. The concept itself has developed throughout history, and even today sociologists have different opinions and work with different definitions based on their own views.

In the Open Education Sociology Dictionary (n.d.) the word ‘class’ is defined as “an individual’s or group’s position within the social hierarchy typically based on power, prestige, and wealth.”

Traditional perceptions are often based on the works of Karl Marx and Max Weber, who analysed the class system in terms of economic relations. Marx’s collective analysis was based on ownership and the means of production, and he recognized two social classes – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Weber, on the other hand, based his analysis on different life chances and market capacity differences, including not only capital but also skills and education.

Another definition describes classes “by the criteria of market and work situations. The market situation refers to material rewards and life-chances such as pay, security and opportunity for promotion. The work situation refers to work tasks and production technology, and the structure of social relations and control systems in firms.” (Abercrombie, 1984).

### 2.2 Historical development of classes in contemporary Britain

British society in general has been associated with social classes for approximately the last 300 years. Classes are often said to be developed from feudalism, which was the fundamental system structuring medieval societies. The system was based on landownership; the more land one held, the more powerful one was. That way, society could be structured in ‘categories’ resembling a pyramid shape. At the top, there was the king who was considered to be the owner of all land. Beneath him came the nobility, then knights and vassals; below them were merchants, farmers and craftsmen, and lastly, peasants and serfs who owned no land but had to work the land for its owners. The feudal system was abandoned in 1660 with the Tenures Abolition Act.

Prior to the Tenures Abolition Act there was the Civil War of the 1640s – the bourgeois revolution – resulting in the rising bourgeoisie and transition to capitalism. Generally, this event is thought to be the point marking the beginnings of British class-based society. According to Royle (1997), the word ‘class’ started to be associated with social structures in the second half of the 18th century; moreover, the term ‘middle class’ was already being used at that time as well.

British historian David Cannadine identifies several historical events as important milestones in the history of British classes. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 brought the aristocracy back to control, and it was not until the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the 18th century that they permanently lost this regained power with the middle class growing more ambitious and numerous. Additionally, the Industrial Revolution led to the creation of a working class. The powerful influence of the middle class was officially confirmed with the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. The years of the late 19th century witnessed the remake of the working class; firstly, there were the rapidly growing trades unions, and secondly, the Labour Party was established. Those two factors contributed to the increasing influence of the working class, and by the 20th century, the clash between the Labour and Conservative Parties was the main economic, political and social conflict of that time (Cannadine, 2000).

Based on what has been described above, the history of classes in contemporary Britain can be divided into three periods according to the centuries: eighteenth century, nineteenth century and twentieth century Britain.

### **2.2.1 Britain in the eighteenth century**

When talking about the development of classes in Britain, the 18th century period can be considered as beginning with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and ending with the American Declaration of Independence in 1776.

Historians were not able to agree which model of society was predominant during that time. Thompson (1974) claims that society was polarised, with the so-called 'Patricians' on one side (those who were in power) and the 'Plebeians' on the other side (those who were poor). Some other historians argue that society was three-layered rather than polarised, and that the middle layer was the one responsible for the country's improvement. Another group of historians believe society was hierarchical and

individualist and should not be described collectively as in both previously mentioned models. Yet most of the historians agree on one thing: due to many differences between Hanoverian England and Britain as a whole, including Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the British colonies, it is particularly difficult to decide whether the society of the 18th century should be characterized only in terms of England, or the whole of Britain. If the respective societies are completely different, it is better to characterize them independently (Cannadine, 2000).

Out of the three models mentioned above, the hierarchically ordered society was the most common perception of Hanoverian England. It was acknowledged by both the authority and the mob. It was an individualist society which put each individual into a corresponding social rank. There were several ranks which ran from the most prestigious one to the least, from the king at the top, followed by the nobility, baronets and knights, to esquires, gentlemen, leading citizens and professionals; next came the yeomen, husbandmen and artisans, and at the bottom were the cottagers, labourers, servants and paupers. Broughton (1746) believed that society ranked that way was actually a natural order of things because it was created by God, and therefore could not be altered by humans (as cited in Cannadine, 2000).

Overall, this hierarchical, individualist model which tried to assign each and every person with a particular rank was rather too idealized and over-simplified with the characteristics of the lower ranks being rather vast and insufficiently detailed. This resulted in an almost impossible differentiation of one person from another. In comparison with today's society, there were individual rather than collective social relations, social mobility was basically non-existent, and prestige was supposed to be mainly inherited.

The second model used for description of the 18th century society was the three-layer model which, as the term itself suggests, divided the social world into three groups. There were many interpretations of these groups, yet they were fundamentally the same: the rich and powerful at the top, the majority in the middle, and the poor at the bottom. Royle and Walwin (1982) state that Defoe recognized the 'landowning sort', the 'middling sort' and the 'labouring sort'; for King it was the 'poorest sort', the 'middle sort' and the 'better sort' (as cited in Cannadine, 2000).

The third division allowed only one broad division of the society. It was the most simplified image which recognized such divisions as 'the rich' against 'the poor', 'the few' and 'the many', 'the educated' versus 'the ignorant', or 'the nobility' and 'the mob'.

According to Perkin (1969), the word 'class' was already being used in associations with English society. However, back then it did not have the same meaning as it has had since the 19th century. In essence it was just another synonym to the words 'rank', 'order', or 'degree', and for that reason it possessed no connotations and simply meant people were individually classified based on their prestige.

Characterizing the society of 18th century Britain as a whole seems very complex since it was spread halfway around the world, having many distinct provinces and many different ways how could people identify themselves. Differences within the British community existed on many levels: on the geographical one there was a wide range of types of landscape as well as climate; some regions were much more prosperous on the economical level than some other regions; historically, the American colonies were centuries younger than England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland; on the population side England was way more densely populated than Wales, Scotland and Ireland, and in addition, population in the American colonies was rapidly increasing; and other major differences laid in culture, language, religion or ethnicities.

The diverse British societies were often described similarly to the society of 18th century England, being characterized either with the hierarchical model, the three-layer model or the polarized model.

The hierarchical model, though typical for the monarchical society of England, was especially greatly accepted in the American colonies. At first, the leading people at the top of the ladder, who were also the ones that favoured the hierarchical system, wanted to be as close to the English monarchical system as possible. However, the absence of a monarch, nobility, or aristocracy actually resulted in the complete opposite and the hierarchy of American colonies was remarkably different. One of the major restraining reasons was the fact that many rich merchants, who were also incredibly powerful, were often born into the lowest ranks of the system and had to work themselves up the ladder. Additionally, there was an alternative model used for describing the society of colonial America; the three-stage model sorted people into 'the better sort', 'the middling sort', and 'the meaner sort'. It was probably a better way of describing this society where the middle class was of much

greater importance than in England, since the upper class was not aristocratic and the lowest one was often enslaved. Lastly, the polarized model was also largely applied to American society. It was often polarized with words and phrases like ‘the genteel’ and ‘the common’, ‘those who rode horses’ and ‘those who did not’, ‘the independent’ and ‘the dependent’, or ‘those who were free’ and ‘those who were slaves’ (Cannadine, 2000).

The societies of the so-called Celtic fringe, meaning Ireland, Scotland and Wales, were mostly perceived by the people living there as traditional hierarchies in which prestige and social position were inherited. Though very similar to the English model, it was never as complex or as rooted in history. The ranks at the top of the society were depleted, and therefore the traditional system was evidently coming apart; as an example, many titles and estates were abandoned after the rebellion of 1745 in Scotland. In Wales, mansions were being vacated after their owners moved to England. The three-layer model was much less commonly used than in England or the American colonies, mainly for the reason that the people of the ‘middling sort’ were less noticeable. This was particularly true for Wales. Many historians agree that of the three models the polarized one best described the societies of the Celtic fringe. In Wales, the distinction was mainly between ‘the rich’ and ‘the vulgar’ and, furthermore, between the elite speaking English – the fashionable language – and the natives speaking Welsh – the language spoken by the poor and anonymous. Irish society was generally perceived as a division between ‘the landlords’ and ‘the ordinary sort’, but a division between ‘Papists’ and ‘Protestants’ was gradually increasing. Scotland was divided between the Highlands and the Lowlands – Gaelic clan culture on one side and Anglicized and modernized culture on the other side (Cannadine, 2000).

Naturally, the social life of people was determined by the way society was shaped. This was visible in mainly in politics and education, and then in health, religion, transport or dress. Political influence was determined hierarchically; the higher on the social scale, the more political power one held. In accordance with the three-layer model of society, the ‘better sort’ governed the country, the ‘middling sort’ were in control of the towns and very involved in elections, and the ‘lesser sort’ were the crowd and the rioters. Similar divisions could be noticed in education. The ‘better sort’ of people attended public schools, Oxford or Cambridge, the ‘middling sort’ went to grammar schools and professional trainings, and the ‘lesser sort’ studied at parish schools if nowhere.

The society of the 18th century, either perceived as a hierarchy, a three-layer society, or polarized division between two different groups, changed forever in 1776 with the American Declaration of Independence which resulted in the creation of a completely new social structure on American grounds which rejected any ideas of being governed by aristocracy. The change of the social structure on the grounds of the British Isles was further conditioned by the work of Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, published in the same year. It very likely contained the very first thoughts about society being formed not by prestige, but by occupation and employment (Cannadine, 2000).

### **2.2.2 Britain in the nineteenth century**

The Industrial Revolution, which occurred in the late 18th century, inevitably transformed the old hierarchical social structure and resulted in the creation of the working class and reformation of the middle class. Both these classes were principally based on collective rather than individual identities. The conflict between them brought about important political changes, such as the Great Reform Act, or the abolition of the Corn Laws. Cannadine (2000) states that there are more interpretations of 19th century society. By the middle of the century, class conflicts were over and three classes (upper, middle, lower) were calmly coexisting next to each other. However, that is only one interpretation of the 19th century British society. The other and more recent interpretation believes that throughout the 19th century the society could be described in the same three models as was the previous century, with the hierarchical model still being the favourable one, but the social perceptions were more deliberately politicized.

The changes that the Industrial Revolution brought were massive. The population doubled in a few decades; cities such as Birmingham, Liverpool or Manchester expanded more than ever, and some parts of the kingdom were trapped in misery and poverty. People were confused by all of those changes, many in fear. Talking about class became more widespread not only in every-day life but also, and more importantly, in politics (Cannadine, 2000).

There was a clash of social perceptions, a debate lasting for about 50 years, which started with Thomas Paine's response to Edmund Burke's statement that hierarchy, as the principle order of the British society, must be preserved. Paine, on the other hand, saw the

society as a division between two classes. He called for ordinary people to have an influence in politics and urged them to rise up against the élite (Thompson, 1963).

Supporters of Burke's hierarchical view were mainly conservatives who believed in the traditional society and who vigorously tried to justify it. And they did: the belief in hierarchy was successfully reasserted. Grand ceremonials were being held throughout the whole kingdom; there was the coronation of George IV, the state funeral for William Pitt, a Tory statesman, or the creation of the Order of St Patrick in Dublin. All of those events showed that there still were hierarchically ordered ranks. Not only was the society on the British Isles hierarchical, but the whole British Empire was too. As Marshall (1995) noted 'Empire reinforced a hierarchical view of the world, in which the British occupied a pre-eminent place among the colonial powers, while those subjected to colonial rule were ranged below them, in varying degrees of supposed inferiority' (p. 385).

In opposition stood radical writers like Paine and his contemporaries. They believed that ordinary people were being oppressed by the hierarchical system which was tyrannical and corrupt. Dyck (1992) demonstrates William Cobbett's interpretation as one of the most famous. Cobbett put the aristocracy, the government, the church, the law, the Bank of England and the East India Company on one side; the rest which he described as the 'labouring' or 'working classes' were on the other side. He noted that from the working people came all of the country's strength and resources (as cited in Cannadine, 2000). This polarized analysis was more and more intensified with food riots, demonstrations and protests happening frequently throughout the early 19th century.

19th century Britain also witnessed the re-formation, or in other words the making of the middle class. There was a widespread belief that the middle class was the most important element in society, holding the top and the bottom together. The contemporary James Will (1820) claimed that it was 'the glory of England' (as cited in Cannadine, 2000). Some even called for a reform in name of the middle class. Lord John Russell urged for increasing the importance of the middle class since it had been the best hope for the future of the country. However, according to Cannadine (2000), the claims about the middle class seem somewhat exaggerated. It was not suddenly reborn as a new self-conscious class, but the talk about the middle class was rather more politicized than ever.

Prior to the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832, defenders of the hierarchy feared the fall of the system and tried to safeguard it. The Whig party's strategy was to



give the vote to the ‘middling sorts’, and therefore, accompany them more with the higher ranks of the society (Thompson, 1963). In the view of the polarized model, the Whigs saw ‘the people’ simply as the middle class and means of preserving the hierarchy. But the people actually saw themselves as both, the middle and the labouring classes which together raged against the upper classes. In 1829, Thomas Attwood founded the Birmingham Political Union ‘of the lower and the middle classes of the people’ which set a model for other unions throughout the whole country. Together they called for ordinary people to be allowed to become MPs, and the enfranchisement of all who paid taxes, either directly or indirectly (Birmingham Political Union, n.d.).

The passage of the Great Reform Act was seen by many as a triumph of the rising middle classes and as a disappointment for the working classes. If they had been associated with the working classes before 1832, they certainly were not afterwards. As Robert Lowery (n.d.) noted, the middle classes ‘looked more to their own class interests than to those of the unenfranchised who had helped them to attain the bill’ (as cited in Smith, 1992). And suddenly, ‘the people’ were now only seen as those who did not vote.

With the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 local government was reformed. Boroughs in England and Wales were to be governed by town councils who were voted for by the local taxpayers. In 1846, Corn Laws were repealed after a successful Anti-Corn Law League. All of that meant that the middle classes were definitely in power. However, hierarchy was still perceived as the most natural social structure.

This perception was beginning to change in the middle of the century when the three-layer model was increasingly seen as the most accurate description of the British society. The British railways separated passengers into three categories – classes – according to the amount of money they were willing to pay. Education was also visibly three-layered. Three royal commissions were established for each class. The Newcastle Commission for working class, the Taunton Commission for the middle class, and the Clarendon Commission for the upper class. Yet the boundaries between the three classes were very difficult to detect as there was a wide variability of occupations.

Another common way of division was based on language and accent. The Queen’s accent was the socially desirable accent mainly gained through education or family, but even people who were normally surrounded by a different accent could learn it since there

were many manuals on how to learn it. In nations outside England, English stood as the instrument of recognizing the 'superior'.

1867 saw the passage of the Second Reform Act which enfranchised the working classes. The politicians' intention was, once again, to preserve the hierarchy, though no one was really sure whether or not the passage would succeed in doing so. Some talked about the working class in a positive way, saying that they had respect for order; in the eyes of the others, the working class was irresponsible and ignorant. They all agreed on one thing – the vote should not be given to the poorest and most dependent citizens, but eventually it was given to more working-class members than they had planned.

After passing of the bill, it was thought that hierarchy was gone for good. However, that was a flawed conclusion, since hierarchy continued to be the predominant social structure which even further developed. The society of 19th century Britain was certainly affected by all of the changes brought by the American Declaration, Industrial Revolution, and the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, yet it did not change the way society was structured – into ranks and orders (Cannadine, 2000).

### **2.2.3 Britain in the twentieth century**

The 20th century witnessed major changes not only in Britain, but all around the world. It was the century of the world wars after which nothing, including all of the different societies, stayed the same. Another reform bill was passed (1918) which resulted in the enfranchisement of almost the whole adult population, and the newly enfranchised working-class people enabled the new Labour Party, established in February 1900, to rise and stand in competition to the Conservatives.

The effects of the Industrial Revolution were palpable by 1900. Britain was the world's most urbanized nation with most of the population living in towns and most workers working manually. At the beginning of the century, society was divided between the masses and the rest who were mostly wealthy or influential people, and this division was reflected in the political parties. The masses were represented by the Liberal Party which was opposed by the Conservative Party representing the rest. The industrialized and polarized nation witnessed many disturbances, mainly in the 1910s when there were hundreds of strikes, the majority of which focused on railway, textile and coal industry. Another aspect contributing to the nation's polarized division was the rise of the Labour

Party which set a common interest for the working class. Only 10 years after their establishment, they had 42 MPs in the House of Commons. However, the Labour Party was the party of the working class, but as Joyce (1994) claims, the majority of workers still voted for the parties preferred by their employers, thus Conservatives or Liberals.

As mentioned above, the polarized view of the society was very common. But parallel to that was the three-layer perception dividing to society into the upper, middle and working classes. For the first time, this model saw the expansion of the middle class into three levels: office workers composed the lower-middle; in the middle were professions like doctors, teachers or lawyers; and finally, there were rich bankers and businessmen. All the more, in the eyes of many the hierarchical perception of the British society was preserved, even though the aristocracy was truly in decline. Partly it was thanks to the establishment of the Primrose League, a political group used for propagating Conservative principles, which had a highly hierarchical character, and whose 'ranks' ran from associates all the way up to the party leader. Moreover, many people were newly granted a title, many towns often chose aristocrats for their mayors, and there were new orders introduced at the beginning of the 20th century, which further intensified the sense of hierarchy. To conclude, all three models of the British society were still perceived in early 20th century and the language of class was interchangeably common to all of them.

The aftermath of the First World War saw major changes in traditional societies such as Germany, Russia or Austria-Hungary where the royalties had been over-thrown. In the case of Britain, it was the hierarchy that was undeniably gone. In politics, peers could no longer be prime ministers, and the House of Lords lost its right of veto. People were more equal in all aspects of life than they had been pre-war. Additionally, in 1918, the Fourth Reform Act was passed and with it all adult men and women over 30 had the right to vote. As a result, Britain was officially a democracy and the Labour Party became the nation's second party. The expanding middle class dominated parliament and government, with businessmen and professionals being the major categories of MPs.

The gap between the capital and labour was further deepening. The capital had been increasing with the creation of new industries and growth of merged businesses, yet members in trades unions doubled to more than eight million from 1914 to 1920 and the number of industrial conflicts and strikes was massive. According to Taylor (1970), this meant a class war between the working class and the capitalists.

Inter-war British society was perceived by politicians as deeply divided into two groups. According to Hoggart (1957), working class people, represented by the Labour Party, saw the division as 'Us' and 'Them'. 'They' were the people at the top who had the power to influence working class people's lives in almost every aspect (as cited in Cannadine, 2000). On the other hand, the Conservatives saw the division from the opposite perspective, placing the responsible and patriotic 'public' on one side, and the threatening and unpatriotic 'proletariat' on the other. As Jarvis (1996) noted, they presented Labour and the trades unions as militant and fighting for their class (working) only (as cited in Cannadine, 2000). However, both of those perceptions were idealized. In fact, many working-class people did not support Labour, and there was no revolutionary proletariat.

The years between the world wars also witnessed the recreation of hierarchy. This was partly because of the leader of the Conservatives Stanley Baldwin who rejected the collectiveness of classes and instead aimed attention at the traditional individual social order, and who successfully convinced many Britons of his view. Supporting his claims was the fact that the honours system further extended after the First World War, and, even more importantly, that the British monarchy survived the war and what came after it.

With the Second World War came changes that affected both the domestic and international environment. The Welfare State was established, industry was nationalized, the wealthy society was more successful than ever, while the working class was on decline, and the traditional aristocracy diminished. On an international scale, Britain lost its status of the number one world power with the rapid decline of the Empire.

The perceptions of the society after the Second World War were, once again, confusing. There was a strong belief in a polarized society and that the war had actually intensified it. Butler and Stokes (1970) confirmed this perception of British society divided into two polarized groups in their survey. However, as had already happened before, the vision was frequently politicized. Ideologically, the Labour party represented the working class, which was increasingly discontented with the élite. On the other side, the Conservatives represented the privileged and the propertied – the capitalists. Nonetheless, the truth actually lay elsewhere as this was merely compelling rhetoric as Cannadine (2000) argues. Both of the parties were in truth less concerned with the interests of either the working class or the élite, they were rather national parties which united the parties. Moreover, the Conservatives gained half of their votes from the working class. Those, who

viewed the society as three-layered, usually referred to the upper, middle and working class. However, there were two perceptions of the middle class. It was either the class responsible for Britain's prosperity, or it was oppressed from both sides, by the governing upper class and the vigorous working class. Still, it was quite impossible to actually define who was considered as belonging to middle class, since everyone had different criteria and views on how to define it. Furthermore, based on a survey conducted in Banbury in late 1960s, it could be concluded that people themselves were not sure about their social identities and whether society was two- or three-staged (Stacey, 1975).

In the first few decades after the Second World War, the hierarchical vision was still visible. This individualistic vision had always been the most popular one, accepted by a third of the working-class people partly as a consequence of Baldwin's insistence. Nevertheless, this vision of hierarchical society started to change during 1960s and 1970s. The fall of the Empire played a major role here since the Empire was basically an image of hierarchy. Moreover, it was on account of the changes within the Conservative Party. No more were there leaders from aristocratic backgrounds; the grocer's daughter, Margaret Thatcher, provides an excellent example of this trend.

Finally, it can be concluded that during the entire century, talk about class was very much politicized, but the social and political identities were always complex and too confusing. No one could really agree on which model of society was the most accurate – hierarchical, polarized, or three-layered? Eventually, in late 20th century only two models of society remained – the polarized and the three-layered.

#### **2.2.4 Thatcherism and new working class**

Before 1979, British society was evidently defined by three classes – working, middle and upper. The working class was unionized, with millions of people being members of trade unions, and in Parliament this class was represented by the Labour Party. There were large working-class communities centred around factories or mines, the sense of community was strong, and being working class was an identity worthy of pride. However, all of that changed when the leader of the Conservatives Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election (Jones, 2011).

“There's no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must

look after themselves first. It is our duty to look after ourselves”, said Thatcher in 1987 (as cited in Margaret Thatcher: a life in quotes, 2013). With these words she basically summarized the aim she had had for the past decade – to prevent people from identifying themselves in terms of class, and rather make them feel that they had to be responsible for themselves only, or, as Jones (2011) noted, it “was to rub out the working class as a political and economic force in society, replacing it with a collection of individuals, or entrepreneurs, competing with each other for their own interests” (p. 48).

Before the 1979 victory, the Conservatives had used a poster in their election campaign bearing the slogan ‘Labour Isn’t Working’ to call attention to the fact that unemployment had increased to one million under Labour. However, instead of ending it, the Conservatives raised unemployment to three million in just a few years of their governance. The reason for masses of people losing their jobs were the constant closures of pits, mills and factories (Strangleman, 2013). According to Jones (2011), a third of manufacturing was gone by 1983 due to Thatcher’s government policies, such as allowing the currency’s value to skyrocket which resulted in much more expensive exports.

Thatcher also led a successful war with trade unions which contributed to the massive decline in the number of union members – from 50 per cent of the whole workforce to only 25 per cent. There were new laws complicating striking since employers newly had the power to fire striking employees, making unions liable for financial penalties, and prohibiting unions from being politically active. In 1980, the government won a thirteen-week long steel workers’ strike, as a result of which thousands of jobs were lost. And that was just the beginning. In 1983, printing industry workers and the National Graphical Association called a strike at the Stockport Messenger newspaper group. The union refused to dismiss a picket line and the strikers were then physically assaulted by 3,000 riot police (Vassilopoulos, 1998). In 1984, a year-long coal miner’s strike, one of the biggest strikes in the British history, started; it ended with the government’s victory. As noted in Jones (2011), the fact that the government beat the country’s strongest unionized power meant that they could beat any other group as well.

As already mentioned above, Thatcher’s aim was to destroy collective identities and instead make people act for themselves only, and feel responsible for their own achievements and failures. Part of this meant owning as much as possible. With the passing of the Housing Bill in 1979, many working-class families became property-owners as they

could purchase a property at very low prices on condition that they had been council housing tenants for many years. However, this eventually led to people having high debts, to average rent being increased four times in a decade, and to the working class being divided into those who owned property and those who did not (Jones, 2011).

Additionally, Thatcherism entailed widening the gap between the rich and the poor, and deepening poverty. Due to new fiscal policy, the poor had to pay more taxes than before, which resulted in their having lower incomes after paying housing bills. On the other hand, the rich were giving up around a third of their incomes in taxes in comparison with the half of the income they had had to pay before. Moreover, the number of people in poverty grew from five million to fourteen million in just over a decade (Jones, 2011).

It is undeniable that Thatcherism changed the British working class. The sense of community was gone; instead people were encouraged to keep obtaining more resources and goods just for themselves. Many working-class people became property-owners but the rest of the class could not afford it which put them on the social edge. During those years, the rich grew richer while the poor became even poorer. No longer were there industrial communities; therefore, people had to look for jobs somewhere else. The new working class, as it is often referred to, is employed in lower status and service sector occupations. This is how we know working class today.

When Thatcher came to power in 1979, there were around 7 million factory workers; nowadays, the number goes just a bit over 2.5 million. On average, four out of ten men still work manually, however, the number constantly keeps declining. The number of manufacturing jobs suffered a massive blow after the Great Recession of 2008 when more than half of the jobs were lost. However, as Jones (2011) points out the British self-identify themselves as working class more now than before, even though the number of manufacturing jobs continues to fall. He believes that it is mostly caused by the fact that the definition of working class is quite confusing since it no longer refers to people mainly working in factories. He claims that it is not fitting to put people into classes based on their incomes since small businessmen could have similar incomes to people with working-class occupations. Instead, he suggests a different definition for working class: “The class of people who work for others in order to get by in life... not only those who sell their labour, but those who lack autonomy, or control over this labour” (p. 144). Such a definition is applicable for such jobs as secretaries, sales assistants or clerks, jobs which are less

physically demanding and neater than the old industrial jobs. The typical working-class occupation has shifted from the old jobs to the new cleaner occupations, hence the rise of a new service-sector working class.

Two typical occupations of the service-sector working class are supermarket and call centre workers. Working in a shop used to be a merely middle-class occupation; however, this changed when people started losing their industrial jobs and had to start looking for work elsewhere. According to Jones (2001) there is an estimated number of three million supermarket workers, who are increasingly forced to work quickly, there are many regulations leaving no autonomy to them, and their pay is miserable with often earning no more than £7 per hour. Another million of the British workforce works in call centres. Their working conditions are even worse than those of supermarket workers. The lack of autonomy they have is extreme, furthermore, they are banned from socializing with their colleagues even though they are surrounded with each other. Every movement is monitored, every minute spent in a bathroom counted. All of that contributes to the workers' high stress levels. And as with the supermarket workers, their pay is also very low. The average annual income of those service-sector jobs is even below the average of the manufacturing jobs (Jones, 2011).

Other characteristics of the new working class are the rise in the number of people of working part-time, or stagnated wages even though productivity keeps increasing. Workers often work overtime for free and their working hours are amongst the highest in EU. There is no shared sense of belonging or community and their stress levels are very high.

The trend of widening the gap between the rich and the poor started during Thatcherism and is still topical. Data from 2009 show that the top bosses earned eighty-one times, in some cases even ninety-four times, more than their full-time workers, while nearly a decade before their incomes were just forty-seven times higher. Furthermore, bosses' pays increase by 6.6 per cent on average, while for the workers the median is 3 per cent (Murphy & Timmins, 2009). Additionally, Jones (2011) reports that the Sunday Times annual Rich List showed that the collective wealth of the UK's thousand richest people increased by thirty per cent in 2010, and that their collective wealth represents twenty-three per cent of the national wealth, while the bottom half covers only six per cent.



## 2.3 Different approaches of class classification

As with the definition of class, it bears repeating that there is no general approach for classifying people into class categories. Different approaches have been developed, each of which has a different aim or takes different aspects into consideration. Some classifications are purely economic (for example the European Socio-Economic Classification, Harrison & Rose, 2006), while others combine together social, cultural and economical aspects (like The Great British Class Survey, Savage et al., 2013). Sometimes, British society is described in contrasting terms like ‘the north and the south’, ‘the young and the old’, or simply ‘the rich and the poor’.

The previous subchapter described how the British classes and perceptions of class had been developing and changing in the previous three centuries; this subchapter will focus on three different approaches that are evident in today’s Britain – a traditional one, an economic one, and a recently updated version of the traditional approach. However, it is important to mention that in this thesis I will focus more on the traditional classification.

### 2.3.1 Traditional classification

The traditional classification is no more represented as the hierarchy it used to be in the previous centuries (see Chapter 2.2). In modern British society it refers to the three-layer model which is supposed to be the conventional model of the British society (Abercrombie, 1984), dividing society into three main groups – upper, middle and working. The latter two are further divided into more categories.

- **Upper class** – consists of the wealthiest individuals who are often considered aristocrats or who inherited their property from their predecessors. Members of this small class are often prestigious universities graduates.
- **Middle class** – represents the largest part of population and is further divided into three groups:
  - **Upper-middle** – this class is represented by wealthy people with professional occupations coming from wealthy families. Usually, they were educated in public schools.
  - **Middle-middle** – typically, middle-middle class people have a university degree and work in intermediate occupations like managers, teachers, doctors or engineers.

- **Lower-middle** – is represented by people having non-manual skilled occupations like office workers or local government officers.
- **Working class** – represents the least well-off British population. Working class people are well-known for speaking in regional accents. The class is further divided into two more categories:
  - **Skilled workers** – typically, they work in industrial jobs requiring particular skills or they work as self-employed contractors.
  - **Semi- and unskilled workers** – are mainly manual factory labourers with no higher education.

The following section will focus on a more thorough description of the traditional social classes, including the social, culture, and life-style aspects.

### 2.3.2 European socio-economic classification

The European Socio-economic Classification (ESeC) was created by the sociologists Eric Harrison and David Rose (2006) in order to “allow researchers to compare the relationship between social organization and life chances cross-nationally” (p. 4). The considered life chances, or in other words opportunities to improve quality of one’s life, are mainly health, poverty, deprivation, education, and so on. The categories created in this classification are based on the already validated and widely accepted Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero Schema which focuses on occupational relations.

The classification’s aim is to understand the employment relations within labour markets; therefore, four basic positions are recognized: employers, the self-employed, employees and those involuntarily excluded. Based on those positions, Harrison and Rose (2006) created the following ten classes.

- **Higher salariat** - large employers, higher grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations like company directors, chief executives and higher-level government officials.
- **Lower salariat** - lower grade professional, administrative and managerial occupations and higher-grade technician and supervisory occupations like health and educational professionals including teachers and nurses, managers of smaller organizations, or science technicians.

- **Higher grade white-collar workers** – intermediate occupations like clerical and administrative jobs with mixed form of employment relationship.
- **Petit bourgeoisie or independents I** - small employer of +/- 10 employees and self-employed occupations excluding agriculture.
- **Petit bourgeoisie or independents II** – self-employed occupations including mainly agricultural occupations.
- **Higher grade blue-collar workers** - lower supervisory with knowledge of organizational needs and lower technician occupations like electronics fitters or telephone line installers.
- **Lower grade white-collar workers** - lower services, sales and clerical occupations regulated with modified labour contract, typically care and shop workers.
- **Skilled workers** – lower technical occupations with modified labour contract like plumbers, locomotive drivers or tool-makers.
- **Semi- and non- skilled workers** – routine occupations with basic labour contract like cleaners, machine operators, porters or drivers.
- **Unemployed** – never worked and long-term unemployed.

### 2.3.3 The great British class survey classification

In 2013, the BBC, together with sociologists Mike Savage and Fiona Devine, conducted the Great British Class Survey (GBCS), an extensive survey with findings from more than 160,000 people. Savage et al. (2013) are of the opinion that the traditional three-class classification is outdated, therefore, they introduced seven new social classes – updated replacements of the traditional upper, middle and working classes.

The researchers based the survey on three capitals – economic, social and cultural. To understand the participants' economic capital, the researchers asked about their household income, savings and their house's value. For the social capital, participants had to identify which of the 37 listed occupations they knew personally and were friends with. Furthermore, the importance of their social contacts had been measured as well. When measuring the cultural capital, participants had been asked how much they engaged in 'highbrow' (listening to classical music, going to museums and stately homes etc.) and 'emerging' (playing video games, going to gigs, using social media etc.) cultural activities.

Additionally, the participants were asked about their education, political beliefs, or household composition (How do you identify new types of class?, 2013).

Based on the GBCS, Savage et al. (2013) created the following seven social classes. The number in the brackets represents how many per cents of this group is represented in the whole British population.

- **Elite (6%)** – the most privileged and wealthiest class. The elite is a group with savings more than double those of the other classes. They are the most engaged in highbrow culture; however, they scored high in the emerging culture as well. The most frequent occupations are chief executive officers, IT directors and marketing directors. Most of them live close to the capital.
- **Established middle class (25%)** – the second wealthiest class with the most social contacts which are mainly of high status. They have the second highest scores in both, highbrow and emerging cultural capital. Mostly, they are professionals and managers. This group tends to live outside cities.
- **Technical middle class (6%)** – this relatively small group is prosperous on the economic level; however, on the social and cultural level, they are very restricted. They have the least number of social contacts and they scored low in the cultural capital. Occupations in this group are mainly scientists, researchers, or pharmacists. Most of them live in the South East.
- **New affluent workers (15%)** – a young group which is very engaged in emerging culture. Economically, this group is secured, and socially, they have many social contacts with moderate status scores. They are occupied in white collar and blue collar jobs, and they live in old manufacturing cities.
- **Traditional working class (14%)** – a relatively poor class which, however, mostly consists of homeowners. They score moderately in cultural and social capital. This predominantly female group mainly works as secretaries, electrical technicians and care workers, and lives in Scotland, Wales and the Northern Ireland.
- **Emergent service workers (19%)** – a group with a higher income than the previous class, but with very limited savings and rented houses. They are culturally active, as they scored the highest in emerging cultural capital. It is a

young group with a high proportion of ethnic minorities. They work as bar staff, chefs, or nursing assistants, and they tend to live in cheaper neighbourhoods of large cities.

- **Precariat (15%)** – the poorest class of all. They have a small number of social contacts and they have cultural apathy. Mostly, they are employed as cleaners, van drivers, and care workers, and they live in old industrial areas outside of the South East.

## **2.4 Description of British social classes**

As mentioned in the previous subchapter, this thesis will be more focused on the traditional classification; therefore, a more detailed description of the traditional social classes is included in this section. The basic classification is upper, middle and working class; however, the middle class is further divided into upper-middle, middle-middle and lower-middle, and working class into skilled workers and semi- and unskilled workers.

### **2.4.1 Upper class**

Originally, upper-class people were aristocrats and people with titles. Nowadays, this social position includes also other wealthy people of mostly professional and managerial positions; traditionally upper-class occupations can include barristers, politicians, academics and so on. However, many upper-class people do not have jobs at all and they rather live off their investments. When it comes to education, upper-class children are usually sent to boarding schools which is followed by graduating at prestige universities like Cambridge or Oxford. In fact, between the years 2010 – 2015 eighty per cent of Oxbridge students were children of top professionals and managers, therefore, belonged to upper class (Richardson, 2017).

According to Tomida (2012), an important class indicator is language and accent. He claims that “upper-class people traditionally have a rather clipped accent which can sound posh, snobbish, exaggerated, aloof and strangled. A significant indicator of this type of accent is the full ‘O’ sound” (p. 274). He also claims that having an upper-class accent is still generally considered an advantage. Furthermore, certain words like napkin, pudding, sofa or lavatory are identified as upper-class words.

People from this group are property-owners. Many of them own country houses or even castles. Their furniture is usually inherited and if a person has to buy new furniture, it very often means that that person has newly become wealthy. The way people dress can also be a class indicator. Upper-class people tend to wear high-quality clothes; for special occasions women often go shopping to designer shops, however, they regard large designer logos on clothes as vulgar. Their style tends to be simple and not overly accessorized (Fox, 2004).

Some of the hobbies typically associated with upper class are hunting, playing golf and polo, or riding. Upper-class women often organize garden and tea parties at their mansions. There are also certain events, like horse racing at Ascot or Henley Royal Regatta rowing race, in which mainly upper-class participate and for which they dress in a formal and very stylish way (Tomida, 2012).

#### **2.4.2 Upper-middle class**

The upper-middle class is usually represented by the wealthiest members of the broadest social class – the middle class. Its members are often employed as doctors, lawyers or executives. Financially, this class has a very good income and is able to accumulate high savings. Like the upper class, upper-middle-class people can also afford a private education for their children who then often become graduates of prestigious universities.

Fox (2004) identifies several language indicators particular for upper-middle class. Members of this class often use the word ‘sorry’ instead of ‘pardon’, they also try to avoid saying the term ‘working class’, instead they might say ‘less privileged’ or ‘ordinary people’.

Home-ownership is the most common way of living for this class. Some even own second homes which can be located both in Britain or other countries (Tomida, 2012). According to Fox (2004), upper-middle houses have bare floors, a second living room often labelled as ‘family room’ with large televisions hidden in it, and no leather or replica furniture. When it comes to dressing, upper-middles are quite similar with the class above. Fox also notes, that women of upper-middle class often go to charity shops to buy clothes, however, they do it on principle.

In general, all middle classes have more varied leisure activities. They engage in a larger number of sport activities, they do gardening, they go to the cinema, opera or concerts, they visit museums and historical monuments, they often attend weekend courses on a large number of subjects varying from learning languages to pottery. In summer they go overseas and during winter they often enjoy a winter holiday – upper-middles often go skiing to countries like Switzerland or Austria (Tomida, 2012).

### **2.4.3 Middle-middle class**

Size-wise, the middle-middle class is the broadest of all classes. Its members are not as rich as the upper-middles, however, their income is still comfortable. They often work as teachers, managers, accountants, bankers, civil servants or company employees. Many of them are graduates of either state or private universities.

Middle-middles speak more in regional accents than members of the classes above it. They use euphemisms for ‘toilet’ and they use words like ‘lounge’, ‘property’ when talking about their home, or ‘sweets’ when talking about desserts (Fox, 2004).

Middle-middle houses tend to be neater and more orderly than houses of the upper classes. Unlike the upper-middles they purchase leather sofas and reproductions of antique pieces of furniture. Their living rooms, called lounges, have carpeted floors and cocktail cabinets. They are also more likely to invite friends to show them their newly purchased furniture. In fashion, middle-middle women like to wear a smaller number of matched accessories, otherwise the middle-middle fashion is in no way distinguishable from other classes (Fox, 2004).

### **2.4.4 Lower-middle class**

Typically, members of this class work non-manually. They are employed as office workers, like clerks or secretaries, they work in local governments, but they can also be shop- or small factory-owners. As Frayne (2017) puts it, lower-middles are financially secure; however, they are not rich. They are property- and car-owners, but they need to take loans and mortgages to afford it, and if they lose their job or the mortgage payments increase briskly, they are at great risk. According to Macionis and Plummer (2008) it is not that common for these people to have a university degree; most of them, however, at least complete a post-secondary qualification.

Fox (2004) claims that the lower classes, including the lower-middle, often mispronounce words and consonants. Their regional accent is not as strong as that of the working classes.

Homes of young lower-middles are styled in a minimalist way with large televisions and sound systems in their lounges. Unlike the young, the older generations like embroidered decorations and collections of souvenirs or small objects like spoons or glass animals (Fox, 2004).

#### **2.4.5 Working class**

As mentioned in the introduction to this subchapter, the working class can be further divided into two more categories – skilled workers and semi- and non-skilled workers. However, the difference is mainly in occupations than life-style; therefore, I decided to characterize both of the categories together. Skilled workers are often self-employed contractors, drivers or construction workers. Those in the semi- and non-skilled category are mainly waiters, cleaners or manual factory workers. Financially, they are the poorest of the British population and they are either council housing tenants or, in some cases, owners of houses (that is mainly thanks to the Thatcherist policy of selling council houses to tenants). As Tomida (2012) claims, working-class children generally perform worse than middle-class children, and they are less likely to continue with tertiary education. Many of them have vocational training.

Working-class people are well-known for speaking with strong regional accents. In the previous century, this working-class accent used to be considered a disadvantage and some people actually attended lessons to learn Received Pronunciation in order to get better jobs (Tomida, 2012). Members of this class often use words like ‘serviette’, ‘dinner’ when referring to midday meal and ‘tea’ when referring to evening meal, or ‘settee’ (Fox, 2004).

It is not uncommon for working-class homes to actually contain very expensive items with minimalistic vibe. However, just as in upper-class homes, mismatched furniture can also be found in working-class homes. There is yet another thing working class has in common with upper class – those are eccentricities like African carvings or dolls. Talking fashion, wearing faux designer clothes with large logos is typically working class. Furthermore, working-class women often over-accessorize, over-dress and over-makeup



while wearing short skirts and very high high-heels. Men like to wear large and obvious gold watches, unbuttoned shirts, or colourful ties (Fox, 2004).

Popular leisure activities among the working class are watching television, going to pubs and pub quizzes, karaoke nights, going to sport matches, or driving into countryside. When it comes to sport, working-class people are mainly fans of football and boxing. There is a trend of buying cheap holiday packages; popular destinations are Spain, Greek or Majorca; however, many working-class people spend their vacations in traditional holiday resorts and camps like Blackpool, Mablethorpe, or Butlin's (Tomida, 2012).

## 3 METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 The aim of research

As previously mentioned in the theoretical part of the thesis, perceptions of classes and British society in general differ from person to person, from sociologist to sociologist. People have different opinions on how society is divided, or what indicators determine one's social class; they may feel differently about their own social position, and their attitudes towards social classes can differ significantly.

Those facts made me interested in finding out more specific information about people's attitudes towards present-day British society. Therefore, the main goal of the practical part is to identify those attitudes and opinions, as well as to determine the overall sociological characteristics of my sample. For the purposes of research, I chose an online questionnaire.

### 3.2 The questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of thirteen questions and is divided into three parts.

The first part focuses more on opinions on the theory of social classes. Therefore, questions such as what constitutes a social class or what determines one's social class in the respondent's opinion are included.

The second part deals with people's identification with particular social classes and their experiences regarding the class system.

The final part consists of sociodemographic questions; the results of this section will be further discussed in the following part of this chapter.

The questionnaire was created via an online platform for designing and managing surveys with the option of analysing the collected data. Most of the questions are closed; there are two Likert scales which identify participants' opinions on two debatable statements. The questionnaire was distributed via social media and internet forums. The original and full version of the questionnaire is enclosed in Appendix. Results of the questionnaire are commented in the following chapter.

### **3.3 The subjects of research**

The questionnaire was intended only for inhabitants of the United Kingdom. It was open for people older 18 years and living in all four countries of the United Kingdom.

In total, I collected 72 responses; more than half of the respondents are females (56.9%) and the rest are males (43.1%). There is a majority of respondents between the ages 18-29 (73.6%), 11.1% are 30-39 years old, other 11.1% are 40-59 years old, and 4.2% are 60 years or older. England is the country of origin for most respondents (65.3%), Scotland comes second (18.1%), then Wales (11.1%) and Northern Ireland (5.6%). 34.7% respondents stated degree or equivalent as their highest level of education. 33.3% of respondents obtained A level or equivalent, 12.5% have GCSEs grades A\*-C or equivalent, 11.1% completed higher education, and 8.2% have some other or no qualification (the number of responses for those two was equal). Almost half of the respondents are employees (45.8%), students are the second largest group regarding employment status (40.3), then there is an equal number of self-employed and unemployed (5.6% for both), and last come the retired (2.8%).

## 4 RESULTS AND COMMENTARY

The results show that opinions and attitudes towards the social class system in Britain do differ in the eyes of British inhabitants; however, in most cases there is always one opinion visibly favoured by the majority.

### **Question 1 - In your opinion, which of the following divisions best summarizes British society?**

63.8% of the respondents answered that society is divided between upper, middle and working classes. More than a third (26.4%) was of the opinion that it is polarized between the rich and the poor. These results correspond with the two common perceptions that society is either polarized or three-layered (see Chapter 2.2).

There were four answers stating a different division. Here it is worth mentioning one respondent's suggested division between upper, upper-middle, middle, working and lower classes which is a similar division to the one I often refer to in this thesis. Another respondent suggested a division between the super-rich, working middle classes and the not working. The other two respondents did not suggest any other division, but rather commented that social-status and education attainment form an important part of the whole system.

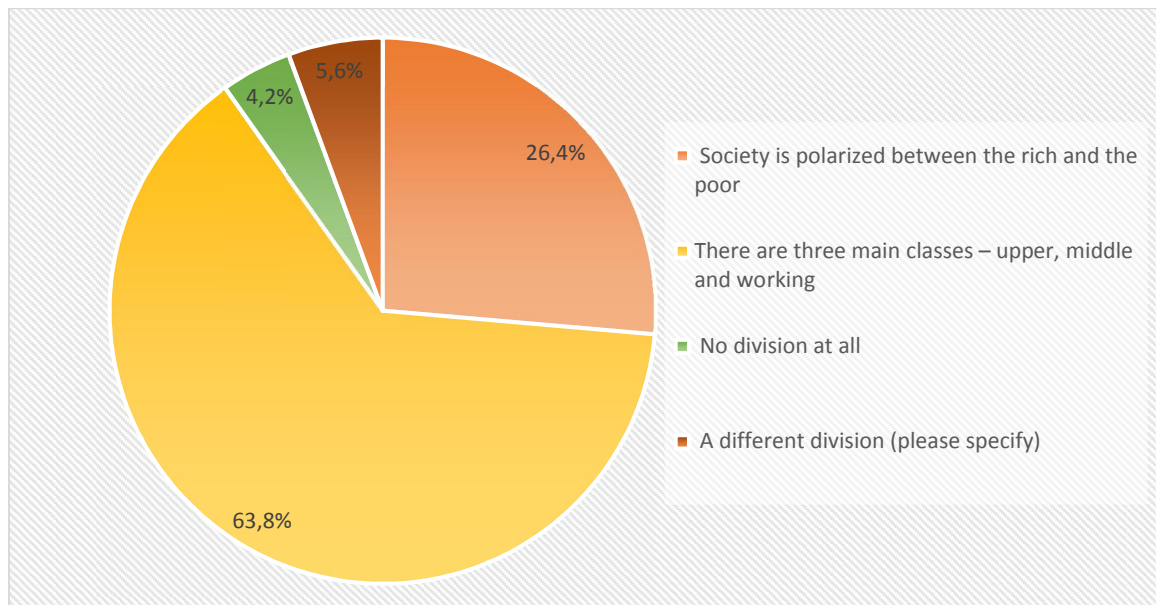


Figure 1

**Question 2 - In your opinion, which of the following statements best defines the term ‘social class’?**

In this question I offered the respondents three different statements that characterize the term ‘social class’.

The first one does not take any economic factors into account. It is based on the belief that members of one social class tend to have similar values and attitudes. Only 18.1% of respondents voted for this option.

The second characteristics is more of a socio-cultural character. According to this statement, education and type of lifestyle are significant indicators of one’s social class. 41.7% of respondents voted for this one which makes it the most voted answer.

The last statement is based on economic values such as income and occupation. No other factors are taken into consideration when judging one’s social class. 40.3% of respondents chose this answer.

Essentially, opinions on this question are split between the second and the last statement; therefore, no answer can be considered as the most major one.

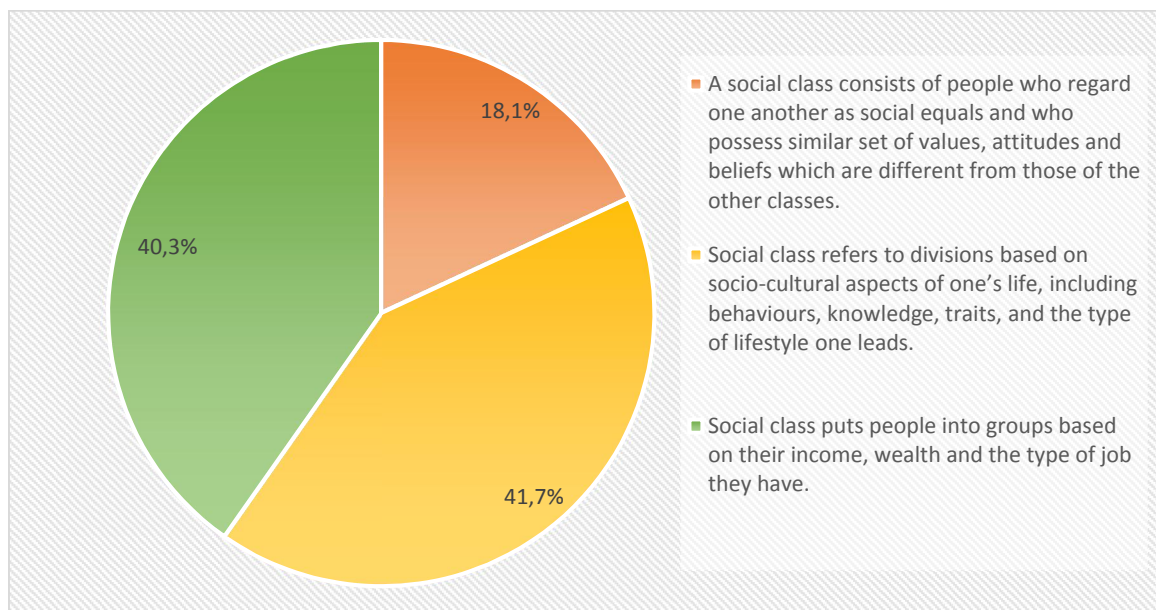


Figure 2

**Question 3 - In your opinion, which of the following can be considered a class determinant? (mark as many items you wish)**

For this question I chose several determinants, covering different aspects like economy or life-style, which could be considered while judging one’s social class. The

three most voted determinants were income (84.7%), occupation (76.4%) and family background (70.8%). This can be connected with the previous question in which respondents were asked to choose the most appropriate characteristics of the term ‘social class’ (see Fig. 2). The first two determinants, income and occupation, are purely economic, therefore, they represent the third statement in which social class is regarded in economic terms. Since only 40% of respondents voted for this option in the previous question, those who voted for other two also often connect social class with economic relations.

The least voted determinants were hobbies (30.6%), choice of vacation (31.9%) and way of dressing (36.1%). Three respondents also included other options: education whether private or state, possibility to achieve, and ways how people can earn money (whether employment or investment). Interestingly enough, some respondents marked all of the determinants (12.5%), while others chose only one of them – either income, political opinions or way of dressing.

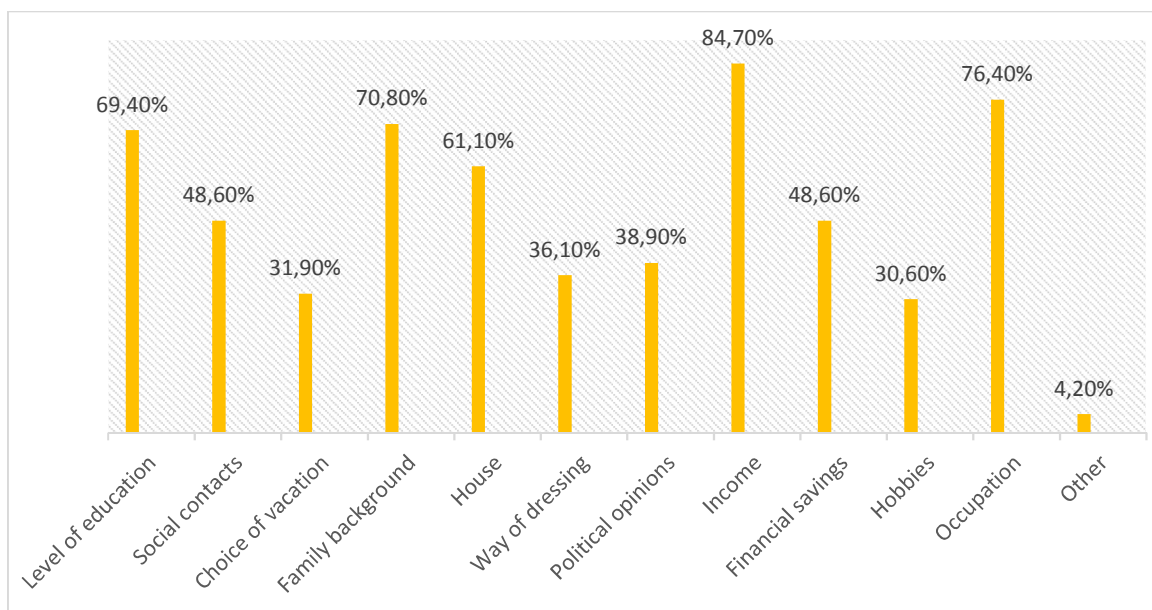


Figure 3

#### Question 4 - How much do you agree with the following statements?

During writing the theoretical part I encountered many controversial statements; two of which I decided to present to the respondents and ask whether they agree or disagree.

“Members of the same class tend to have the same political opinions and attitudes.”

– This one is not a statement I encountered directly; rather I found similar information in various sources. A majority of respondents (61.1%) agree with it, 13.9% of them strongly. In the previous question, 38.9% of respondents marked political opinions as a determinant of one’s social class (see Fig. 3). One might think that if someone agrees with the statement, they would also mark political opinions as a social class determinant; however, this is certainly not this case since there is quite a difference between the number of people who agreed with the statement and those who marked it a social class determinant.

“We are all middle class now,” announced John Prescott who shared the same view as Tony Blair (Jones, 2014). I believe that in the chapters of the theoretical part it has already been demonstrated that this statement is not strictly accurate. The figure below demonstrates that my respondents do not agree with it either. Almost two thirds (72.2%) disagree, of which almost half (34.7%) disagree strongly. Only 7% of respondents agree with the statement.



Figure 4

**Question 5 - Which of the following social classes best describes your social position?**

In this question, I asked respondents what social class they identify with. It is almost impossible for me to evaluate if their self-identification is correct, however, this is not even the aim of the questionnaire, which is rather to discover respondents’ thoughts.

The majority of respondents stated they were middle class (69.5%), of which 12.5% were upper-middle class, 27.8% middle-middle, and 29.2% lower-middle. 22.2% of respondents identified with the working class and nobody identified with the upper class. I also added the ‘I am not sure option’ which 8.3% of respondents chose. More than half of the sample (51.4%) is distributed amongst the lower classes (working and lower-middle).

I contrasted the highest level of education of those who stated they were upper-middle class and working class. Upper-middle class respondents had obtained either a degree or its equivalent (55.56%), A-levels or their equivalent (22.22%), higher education (11.11%) or other education (11.11%). Working class respondents had obtained either a degree or its equivalent (37.5%), A-levels or their equivalent (31.25%), higher education (25%) or GCSEs or their equivalent (6.25%). In conclusion, university degrees are more common with upper-middles; however, even many working-class respondents graduated from a university, though the majority have a lower level of education.

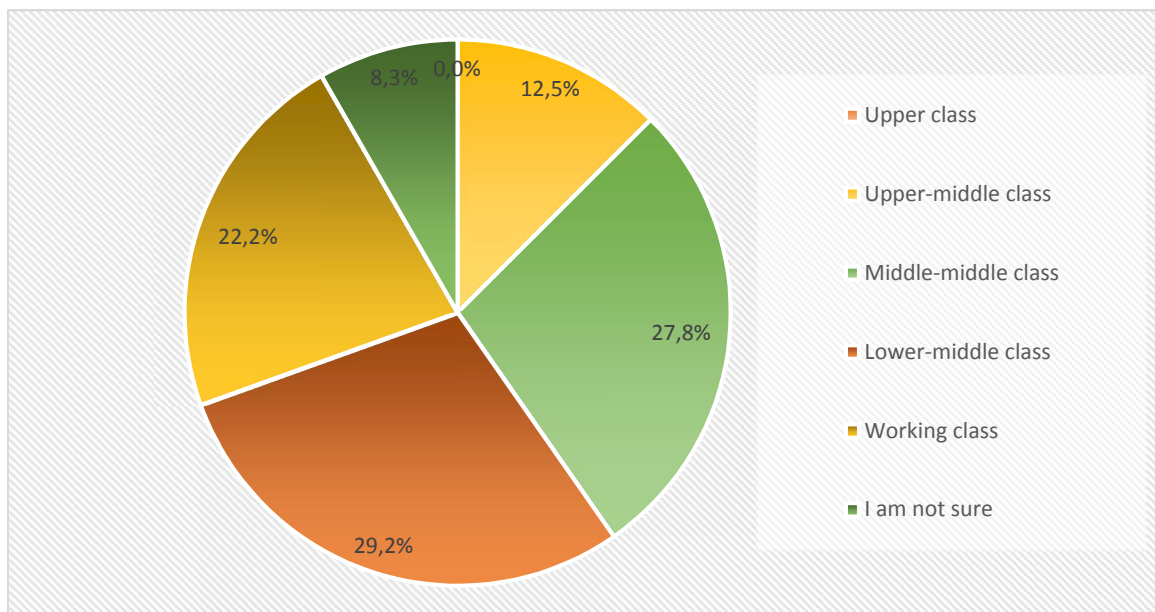


Figure 5

**Question 6 - How often do you encounter discussions about class? (e.g. at work, on TV or in newspapers, with friends etc.)**

It is often said that social classes are an equally significant element of the British culture as for example tea or weather talk (Robson, 2016). Therefore, I asked the participants how often they actually hear or talk about social classes.



As shown in the figure below, exactly 50% of respondents stated that they hardly ever encounter talks about social class. 34.7% hear about it a few times a month, 11.1% every day and the rest (4.2%) never. I tried to make a connection of those who stated they encounter such talks every day with their social class, and discovered that 62.5% of them are middle-middle class. However, the sample of respondents who voted for ‘Every day’ is very small; therefore, such great importance should not be attached to that conclusion.

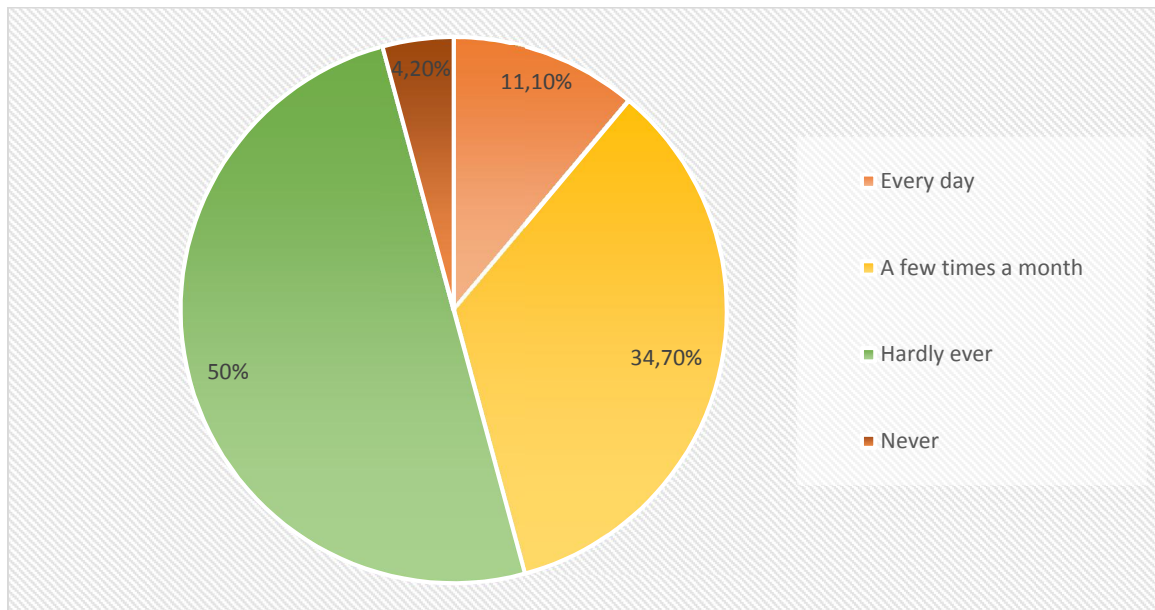


Figure 6

### Question 7 - In which situations do you encounter such talks?

This question further clarifies the previous one by identifying where or in which situations respondents encounter talks about class. I included four options which I considered as the most relevant to social class discussions. The fifth option is for stating any other relevant situation. It is important to mention that even respondents who, in the previous question, stated they never or hardly ever encounter such talks had the option to answer this question too. Everyone except for two respondents decided to answer this voluntary question.

Almost half of the sample stated they mainly hear such references on television or read about it in newspapers (48.6%). 41.7% also talks about class with their family or friends. This might lead to the idea that social class is truly an important element of British culture. However, it bears repeating that 54.2% of respondents hardly ever or never encounter social class discussions (see Fig. 6). The least frequent place where respondents talk about social class is their work (9.7%). Two respondents also mentioned that they

discuss social classes at school; the other two who marked the option 'Other' do not remember the exact situation.

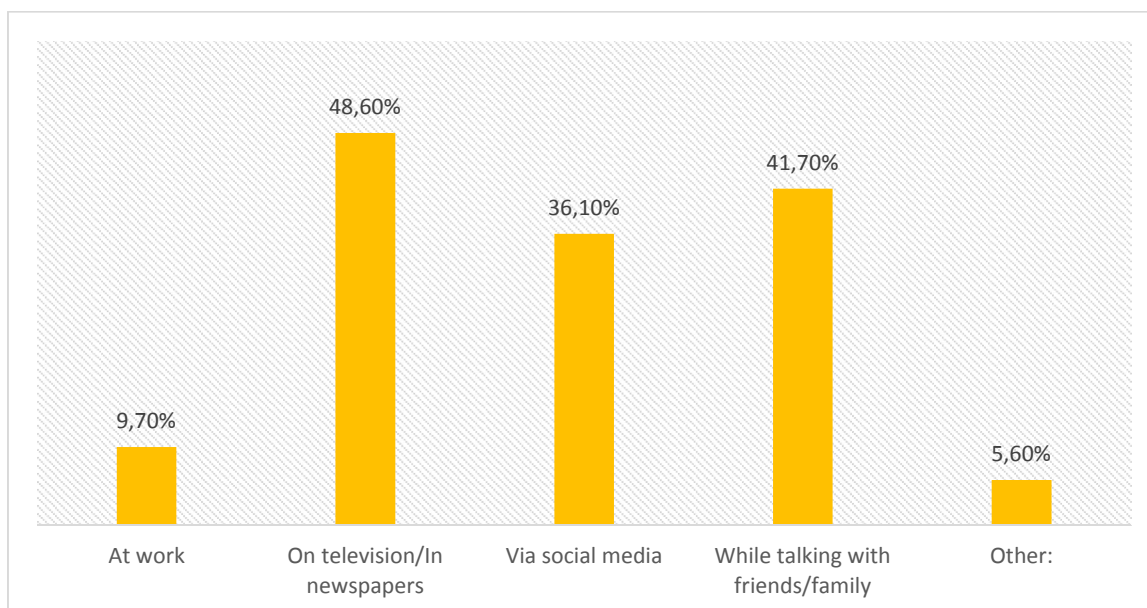


Figure 7

### **Question 8 - Have you ever been judged because of your class?**

In the last question I asked respondents whether they have ever been judged because of their class. If their answer was positive, I asked them to further specify the issue. Majority of respondents (72.2%) answered they have never been judged because of their social position.

I looked at all of the 20 answers specifying their experience with being judged, and sorted the answers into categories. 25% of those who have experienced judgment said they have been looked down to by those from higher classes; the respondents were from working class (2), lower-middle class (2), and middle-middle class (1). Other 20% have experienced judgements based on the location they live or grew up; half of them were from the working class, the other half was from the lower-middle class. Financial constraints have been the reason of judgment for 15% of respondents, all of them from working class. One respondent mentioned not being able to do many hobbies because of the lack of money; other has been laughed at for not being able to afford many things; and the last one complained about being denied to rent properties because of being on low income. Other 15% mentioned being judged because of their accents; this was the case of a working-class person with regional accent and two upper-middle class people with posher accent. Other reasons mentioned included being wealthy (from a middle-middle respondent), wearing

expensive clothes (middle-middle), or being employed in certain unspecified jobs (working class).

Overall, most positive answers to this question came from working-class respondents (45%), then from lower-middle respondents (25%), middle-middle respondents (20%), and lastly from upper-middle respondents (10%). The results show that the chance of being judged based on social class increases, the lower down the social system one is.

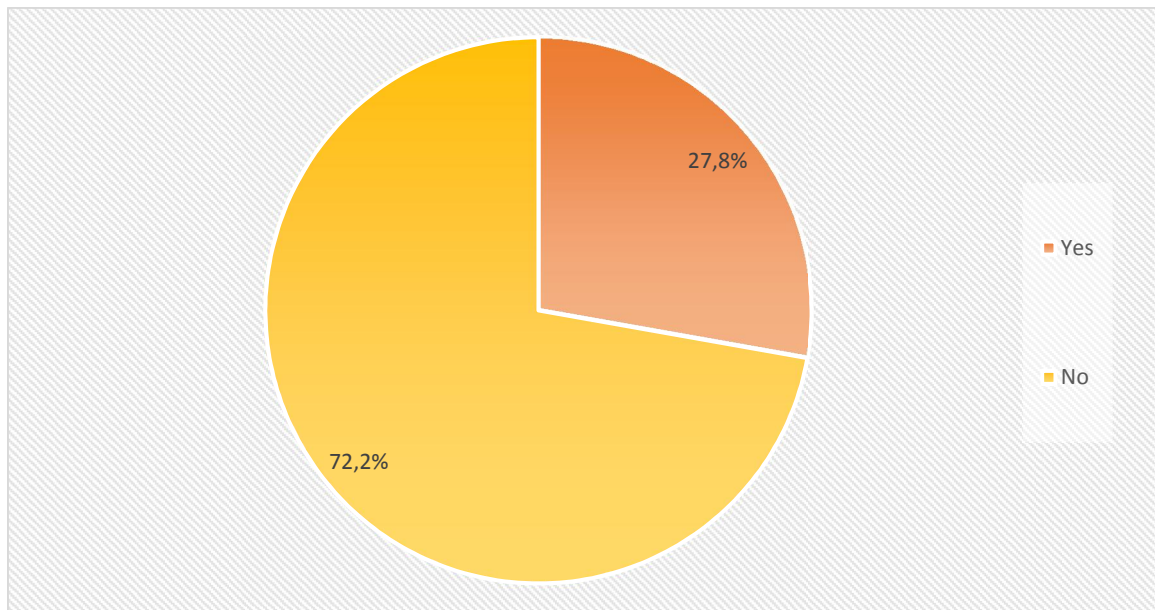


Figure 8

## 5 CONCLUSION

In Britain, social classes are still an important aspect of British culture and social life. Social divisions may not be as evident today as they used to be; however, they are still there. Sociologists might argue which social division most appropriately fits British society; however, the traditional division into upper, middle and working class is the most widespread perception of society amongst the British population.

The first aim of the thesis was to map the development of classes in the history of contemporary Britain. During medieval times, feudalism shaped the way how society looked at that time. When feudalism ended in late seventeenth century, the newly capitalistic society became to be structured in hierarchical order with the ruling aristocracy at the top. Another important milestone in the development of classes was the Industrial Revolution which resulted in the creation of a working class. With the passing of several Reform Acts, the rise of Labour Party and trade unions, working class gradually became more powerful and influential. Nevertheless, that changed when the Conservatives led by Margaret Thatcher won the 1979 election. Thatcher wanted to rid people of their communal identities, and make them selfishly think for themselves only. During Thatcherism, the number of trade unions members fell rapidly, unemployment was at its peak, the gap between the rich and the poor widened, and the old manufacturing communities were gone. As a result, new working class has risen; that is the working class we know today – people employed in service sector occupations and lower status jobs.

Secondly, the thesis described several class classifications. Special emphasis was placed on the traditional classification into upper, middle and working class. Those classes were described more thoroughly in a separate section, including description of life-styles particular to certain classes. As an economic representant I chose the European Socio-economic Classification created in 2006. It is based on occupations and employment relations. The Great British Class Survey Classification created in 2013 is another classification; it is supposed to replace the traditional one. It takes into account economic, social and cultural aspects of one's life.

The last aim was to discover the different views on classes held by the British. I conducted an online questionnaire which was distributed amongst the British public; seventy-two people agreed to participate in it. The results proved that people's perceptions

of classes differ; however, usually there was one answer favoured by most of the participants. Most people agreed that society was based on the traditional classification; nevertheless, more than a third was of the opinion that the division is held primarily between the rich and the poor. When asked about the definition of social class, the answers were split between an occupation-based definition and a definition of socio-cultural character; however, majority of respondents considered economic determinants (such as income and occupation) as the most liable indicators when judging one's social class. I was also interested whether participants had ever experienced being judged because of their class. More than a third answered positively; they had been either looked down to, or judged because of the location they lived in or because of not being able to afford things. Interestingly, I came to a conclusion that the chance of being judged gradually increased with being in the lowest positions of society.

To summarize, the thesis succeeded in accomplishing all of the goals established in the introduction. It covered the whole historical development of classes on the British Isles, described the different approaches of class classification, and, in the practical part, it demonstrated the different opinions and views on social class.

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## APPENDIX

### Sample questionnaire:

#### British social classes

Hello,

my name is Nikola Volrábová and I am a student of English at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic.

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this survey regarding British social classes. The survey is mainly focused on your own personal attitudes and opinions regarding the British class system. Your answers will help me with my undergraduate thesis.

This survey should only take around 5 minutes to complete. All answers will be kept anonymous.

1. In your opinion, which of the following divisions best summarizes the British society:
  - a) The society is polarized between the rich and the poor
  - b) There are three main classes – upper, middle and working
  - c) No division at all
  - d) A different division (please specify):
  
2. In your opinion, which of the following statements best defines the term ‘social class’?
  - a) A social class consists of people who regard one another as social equals and who possess similar set of values, attitudes and beliefs which are different from those of the other classes.
  - b) Social class refers to divisions based on socio-cultural aspects of one’s life, including behaviours, knowledge, traits, and the type of lifestyle one leads.
  - c) Social class puts people into groups based on their income, wealth and the type of job they have.
  
3. In your opinion, which of the following can be considered a class determinant?  
(more answers allowed)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Level of education</li><li>• Family background</li><li>• House</li><li>• Way of dressing</li><li>• Political opinions</li><li>• Income</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Financial savings</li><li>• Hobbies</li><li>• Occupation</li><li>• Social contacts</li><li>• Choice of vacation</li><li>• Other:</li></ul>
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4. How much do you agree with the following statements?

“Members of the same class tend to have the same political opinions and attitudes.”

- a) Strongly agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neutral
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly disagree

“We are all middle class now.”

- f) Strongly agree
- g) Agree
- h) Neutral
- i) Disagree
- j) Strongly disagree

5. Which of the following social classes best describes your social position?

- a) Upper class
- b) Upper-middle class
- c) Middle-middle class
- d) Lower-middle class
- e) Working class
- f) I am not sure

6. How often do you encounter talks about class? (e.g. at work, in TV or newspapers, with friends etc.)

- a) Every day
- b) Few times a month
- c) Hardly ever
- d) Never

7. In which situations do you encounter such talks?

Open question

8. Have you ever been judged because of your class?

- a) No
- b) Yes (please specify):

9. Gender

- a) Male
- b) Female

10. Age

- a) 18-29 years old
- b) 30-39 years old
- c) 40-59 years old
- d) 60 years or older

11. What is your country of origin?

- a) England
- b) Northern Ireland
- c) Scotland
- d) Wales

12. Highest degree or level of education completed

- a) No qualification
- b) GCSEs grades A\*-C or equivalent
- c) A level or equivalent
- d) Higher education
- e) Degree or equivalent
- f) Other qualifications

13. Employment status

- a) Employee
- b) Self-employed
- c) Unemployed
- d) Retired
- e) Student

## SUMMARY IN CZECH

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá sociálními třídami na území Velké Británie. V teoretické části práce zprvu mapuje historický vývoj tříd v britské společnosti a zvláštní pozornost věnuje dobám, kdy byla Margaret Thatcherová britskou premiérkou. Tehdy sociální třídy, konkrétně především třída dělnická, prodělaly velké změny. V další části práce popisuje různé přístupy ke klasifikování tříd a zaměřuje se zejména na tradiční členění na vyšší, střední a dělnickou třídu. Tyto tři třídy jsou v práci dále popsány více podrobně.

V praktické části je analyzován dotazník, který má za úkol odhalit odlišné názory Britů na sociální třídy. Mimo jiné se dotazník také zaměřuje na zkušenosti s třídním systémem, a to zejména na to, zda byli respondenti okolím někdy souzeni za své postavení ve společnosti.