The Historical Socio-Economic Classification of Occupations through Measures of Rateable Value.

The classification of social class has been a source of controversy, since Stevenson's official 1913 eight-fold class categories. He used an intuitive assessment of skill and education for the basis of his classification, on the assumption that socio-economic status was based on a combination of income and culture. He argued that there was an association between the classified social classes and measures of mortality and fertility, although there is evidence that this was not true for periods before the twentieth century.[1] His problem was that he did not have an objective and independent method of assessing the accuracy of his method of classification.

Stevenson himself was cautious in his claims for the accuracy of his system of classification. He wrote: 'This assignment is by no mean precise, for in many cases, especially in commerce and industry, the census occupational description gives no certain indication of social position. The farmer for instance may farm 10 acres of 1,000, and the draper or iron puddler may be the head of a large establishment or his lowest paid assistant or labourer. As a result, many men, especially business men, belonging to the middle classes have necessarily been included with the working class...'[2]

His system of social class categorisation has been used almost universally by social historians, demographers and epidemiologists. However, it has attracted a great deal of criticism. It was finally replaced in 2001 by the new O.N.S. system of classification, *National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification* [NS-SEC]. The lead authors of the new system, David Rose and David Pevalin, have summarised the reasons for its replacement as follows: 'The limitations of SC [Social Class Based on Occupation], which remained almost unchanged from 1921 until its demise, are legion. It has been correctly described as an intuitive or a priori scale. A plethora of articles and book chapters have appeared in the last twenty years calling attention to its problems'[3]

The NS-SEC system attempts to resolve these difficulties by re-classifying occupations. It requires the identification of a 'household reference person' – and 'that person's [occupational] position to stand for the whole household.' The reference person is 'responsible for owning or renting' the household, and in the case of joint householders, 'the person with the highest income takes precedence.'[4] This means that information on the income of two or more household members is not included in the final socio-economic classification of occupations, and with the historical growth of women's employment, this is a serious flaw in the new system. It also suffers from the fact that most historical datasets, including birth, marriage and death certificates, parish registers, vaccination birth registers, valuation rolls and other forms of data, do not have information on employment conditions. All these sources are used widely by social historians and other social scientists.

What is required is a way of independently assessing the validity of any system of social class classification, and there is data which meets this requirement – rateable value of households. It is based on the rental value of property, which is a measure of socio-economic status.[5]

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[1] See P. Razzell, 'Rateable Value as a Historical Measure of Socio-Economic Status' on *Academia.*

[2] *Seventy-Fourth Annual Report of the Registrar General*, p. xli.

[3] D. Rose and D.J. Pevalin, *A Researcher's Guide to the National Statistics Socio-economicClassification* (London, 2003), pp. 1, 2.

[4] *The National Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC)*, Office of National Statistics.

[5] Although this essay is a discussion of historical measures of rateable value, it will be possible in future to use the eightfold council tax bands currently in operation.

Available research shows that rateable value was historically associated with levels of income, wealth, household expenditure, and measures of social class.[6] This can be illustrated by Hayes's research on probate and economic household value for a sample of 459 people in Nottingham during 1934, and the following table indicates that there was a linear relationship between wealth and rateable value.

Probate Levels and Median Rateable Value in Nottingham, 1934.[7]

Probate Levels	*Median Rateable Value*
£1-£900	£23
£1,000-£1,999	£32
£2,000-£4,999	£52
£5,000-£9,999	£66
£10,000-£24,999	£72
£25,000-£49,999	£88
£50,000-£99,999	£109
Over £100,000	£145

Rateable value was used by the Registrar General to measure the relative poverty and wealth of registration districts in London in the 1840s, with the poorest East End districts having much lower mean rateable values than the prosperous West End.[8] This was also the case in the 1880s with similar associations between rateable value and the poverty/wealth of registration districts.[9] In addition to economic measures, rateable value also provided information on culturally defined aspects of social status. Nick Hayes in a review of rateable value and other measures of status has concluded that

> the house ... was the most visible social guide to a family's level of income; moving house – 'up' or 'down' – the surest indicator of changing aspiration or financial circumstance, and for most the single most important expression of their position in society. For the historian, housing offers a common, attenuated spine around which status was woven, a means by which both 'objective' class and 'subjective' status can be jointly valued and assessed ... Economic valuations (being based on nominal rents) took into account ... physical appearance ... embellishment beyond cost, as well as the size of the house and its area location (salubriousness, amenities) – and around the totality of which .individual and family 'lifestyle' was located and fixed.[10]

This quote indicates that rateable value is a measure of cultural identity as well as economic status, confirmed by the claim that 'families brought with them specific sets of cultural values ... not simply between classes but within (between "rough" and "respectable" for example), where quality of housing stood as a reasonable proxy for the neighbourhood's "general sense of wellbeing" and income level.'[11]

In 1911 the Inland Revenue Office introduced a Land Duty Survey which covered the whole of the United Kingdom. This included information on all forms of property, including land and buildings, with summary statements of rateable value. Additionally, all local authorities were required to levy taxes on properties to provide revenue

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[6] Razzell, 'Rateable Value', Academia.
[7] Hayes, op. cit., p. 132.
[8] See P. Razzell, *Population and Disease: Transforming English Society, 1550-1850* (London, 2007), pp. 136, 137.
[9] Razzell' Rateable Value' Academia.
[10] N. Hayes, 'Calculating class: housing, lifestyle and status in the provincial English city, 1900- 1950', *Urban History,* 26, 1 (2009), pp.123, 125.
[11] Nottingham Elites and Civil Society 1900-1950: Status, Engagement and Lifestyle, Online https://Nottingham-elites.org.uk/housing.php, pp. 2, 3.

for local government, and this information is available for most areas in the United Kingdom from the nineteenth century and earlier. The Land Duty Survey includes information on occupation and rateable value, and runs parallel to the 1911 Census, allowing detailed research on the classification of occupations.

A preliminary unpublished study the 1911 Land Duty Valuation Register in Glasgow enables a detailed and independent analysis of the classification of occupations. Provisional data suggests there was considerable variation both within and between Stevenson's social class categories, so that for example the households of Social Class 1 merchants have an average rateable value of £67.9 compared to £13.1 for Social Class 1 salesmen. The occupation designated as writers in Social Class 2 had a mean value of £59.8 and schoolmasters £32.3, indicating that Stevenson's system of classification is inconsistent at these social class levels. His system is more accurate at lower status levels, so that labourers' households in Glasgow had a mean rateable value of £7.3 and miners £7.0, the lowest measures so far recorded in the research.[12]

Stevenson's classification also suffers from a greatly swollen Class 3 category, with nearly a half of all occupations at this level. Additionally he created three additional categories for agricultural labourers, textile workers and miners, as these did not fit in the pattern of mortality and fertility that he created. In the case of agricultural labourers, this was probably due to the rural nature of their residence.

Rateable Value overcomes all these problems as it is a precise, numerical measure derived on a local basis, and provides information for the calculation of a gradient from very high to very low levels of status. It can be used both directly for the calculation of status and for the classification of occupational socio-economic categories. For future research it will allow the gradual establishment of a revised national classification of occupations, invaluable for historical, demographic and epidemiological research.

[12] For fuller details on occupation and rateable value see the paper 'Rateable value as a historical measure of socio-economic status' on Academia.