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The conditional politics of class identity: class origins, identity and political attitudes in comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

The sources, meaning and political implications of class identity are conditional on national context, reflecting the relative importance of cultural (status-related) versus economic (resource-related) influences on class identification. Unlike Danes, the majority of Britons continue to identify as working class. This difference between the two societies is robust across the span of 50 years of survey data analysed. It is unrelated to national variations in inequality, reflecting instead the far larger influence of an ascriptive source of identity, class origins, in Britain compared with Denmark, where current class remains the primary influence. The two societies in turn differ in the extent to which class identity is associated with economic or cultural politics. In Denmark, working class identification is associated with endorsement of redistribution, in Britain it is associated with opposition to immigration. High levels of working class identification in Britain therefore provide an augmented constituency for the radical right rather than the left.

KEYWORDS Class identity; class origins; radical right politics; immigration attitudes; redistributive attitudes; social status

Historically, social identity has been central to political cleavage analysis (Bartolini and Mair 1990), in which collective identities are assumed to provide a stable connection between social structure and politics. Identity was also important in research on voting behaviour: In the American Voter (Campbell *et al.* 1960) identity plays a central role in 'the funnel of causality' linking social background with voting. Despite a move towards rational choice inspired models of policy proximity and performance evaluation in the years that followed, recent decades have seen a

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renewal of research into the role of social identities for explaining electoral outcomes (e.g. Bornschier *et al.* 2021; Egan 2020; Gest 2016; Hochschild 2016; Huddy 2001; Klandermans 2014; Robison and Moskowitz 2019; Shayo 2009; Stubager 2009).

In a similar way, class identity and consciousness were driving concerns of political sociology in the mid to late twentieth century (Mann 1973; Marshall *et al.* 1988; Sartori 1969; Wright 1985), accompanied by a considerable amount of research into the influence of class identity on political orientations (e.g. Butler and Stokes 1969; Centers 1949; Jackman and Jackman 1983). Butler and Stokes (1969), in particular, saw class identification as the primary mechanism through which social classes developed their, at the time, electorally decisive political preferences. Again, interest in class identity withered over time, in part because interest in class itself withered as it was assumed that class inequalities were disappearing and divisions between classes were blurring (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Clark and Lipset 2001). Recently, however, the emergence of radical right parties in many European societies has seen a growing focus on identity politics and a renewed interest in varieties of class politics (Bornschier and Kriesi 2013; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). This has been accompanied by an interest in the impact of class identity on voters' political choices (D'Hooge *et al.* 2018; Sosnaud *et al.* 2013), as well as in class identity appeals by parties (Evans and Tilley 2017; Robison *et al.* 2021; Thau 2021), and the importance of class-related political representation for class voting (Evans and Tilley 2017; Heath 2015, 2018; Vivyan *et al.* 2020).

Despite this re-emergence of interest in class identity and politics, the comparative literature has produced more questions than answers. It has been claimed that the relationship between class identification and income level is accentuated by higher levels of inequality, but also that inequality is associated with a reduction in the association between objective and subjective class. Some studies find over-representation of middle class identities while others find over-representation of working class identities. Evidence on the relationship between class identity and political preferences has been inconsistent, linking working class identification with support for redistribution on the one hand, or social conservativism on the other, or finding that class identity has no association with political preferences. In an attempt to resolve some of these inconsistent findings we propose that the meaning of class identity varies comparatively and therefore we should not expect it to have a uniform relationship with inequality or a uniform impact on political preferences. More specifically, we propose that societies can differ in the extent to which they have cultural versus economic conceptions of class, which in turn have differing implications for political attitudes.

In developing these arguments, we draw upon two distinct approaches to understanding subjective class: One treats identity as a reflection of resource inequalities (e.g. Jackman and Jackman 1983). To the degree that it is a consequence of resource inequalities, class identity is likely to be associated with divergent preferences concerning 'classic' left–right, redistributive politics. The second discusses class in terms of culture, lifestyle and social distinction, or status (e.g. Bourdieu 1984). From this perspective, class identity is likely to be linked with attitudes towards 'particularistic' politics, the so-called second dimension of politics concerning liberal versus authoritarian values and attitudes towards issues such as immigration.

We proceed as follows. First, we elaborate upon the idea that class identity has cultural and economic forms and these in turn imply differences in the association between class identification and political preferences. We then describe the key differences between our two societies with respect to economic inequality and class culture and present the hypotheses derived from these differences.

In the first part of the empirical analysis, we examine how a substantial difference between Britain and Denmark in levels of working class identification can be understood. We examine patterns of class identification and their relationship with occupational class over nearly 50 years in the two countries. We show that distributions of class identity are relatively stable and not strongly related to changes in inequality.

We then investigate cultural aspects of class identity by estimating the strength of individuals' class of origin, compared to their current class, on their class identification. If class identification is to a large extent influenced by class of origin it can be considered to be indicative of an ascriptive class culture. If current class position carries more weight, it suggests identity derives from attributes associated with contemporary circumstances. We show that Britain and Denmark have different sources of influence on class identity: Britons put more weight on their class origins, whereas Danes mainly take account of their current class position.

Finally, we examine the net association between class identity and economic left–right and particularistic attitudes in the two countries. Consistent with our argument concerning cultural differences in class identification, a working class identity in Britain is linked with anti-immigration attitudes typically associated with radical right support, whereas in Denmark working class identification is associated with attitudes endorsing economic redistribution. The high level of working class identification in Britain therefore impacts on political preferences, but not in a way associated with contemporary left-wing politics.

The sources and political implications of class identity: economic and cultural

Much recent research into the origins and political effects of class identification has used widely available comparative cross-national surveys such as the World Values Survey, the European Election Survey and the International Social Survey Program, and has assumed that class identity has similar sources, characteristics and implications across diverse societies. However, the findings are generally unclear. Andersen and Curtis (2012), for example, find that higher levels of inequality are associated with polarisation, a tighter link between being poor and identifying as working class and vice versa for the middle class. In contrast, Curtis (2016) finds a positive correlation between national level inequality and the blurring of the class basis of class identities as a result of working class identities being over-reported in the middle and upper class. Other researchers find a tendency to over-report a middle class identity among occupationally working class respondents (e.g. D'Hooge *et al.* 2018; Sosnaud *et al.* 2013), which has typically been seen as resulting from social comparison processes, whereby people place themselves in the middle of their local social order (Evans and Kelley 2004; Kelley and Evans 1995).[1] In contrast, there is evidence that in Britain people believe they are working class even when occupationally they are not (Evans and Mellon 2016), while D'Hooge *et al.* (2018: 87) show that not only does the UK have far more people who see themselves as working class than their occupational position would suggest, but other societies display considerable variation in their patterns of class misplacement.

There have also been a few recent studies explicitly examining the links between class identification and political preferences. Again, however, findings vary considerably: Sosnaud *et al.* (2013) find no evidence of class identification effects on political choice in the USA once education and race are controlled, while D'Hooge *et al.* (2018), examining a pooled dataset of 18 countries, find that people who see themselves as more middle class are more right-wing economically, and *vice versa* for those who see themselves as more working class. In contrast, Evans and Mellon (2016) find that in Britain occupationally middle class respondents with working class identities are more socially conservative.

We can at least start to resolve the varying and, in some cases, inconsistent findings in this literature by considering which aspects of stratification expressions of class identity signify. There are grounds for distinguishing two broad emphases: one being economic or resource-related and the other being cultural, or status-related.

From the first perspective, class identity is primarily an economic identity reflecting experience of social inequality. Sosnaud *et al.* (2013),

for example, refer to the 'perceived economic interest' hypothesis, in which identification with a particular social class depends primarily on someone's current socio-economic situation. Most of the earlier research on class identity used this interpretation of class identity (e.g. Jackman and Jackman 1973, 1983; Marshall *et al.* 1988). It relates class identity to preferences along the economic axis of politics, which differentiates redistributive and interventionist policy programmes from pro-market, laissez-faire programmes (Evans *et al.* 1996; Kitschelt 1994).

The second perspective on class identity concerns cultural orientation. What Sosnaud *et al.* (2013) refer to as the 'cultural affinity' perspective. It echoes the influential thesis of working class authoritarianism (Lipset 1959; van der Waal *et al.* 2007) and leads to the expectation that working class identity is associated with authoritarian and particularistic preferences.[2] This association derives from the connection between class and social status. To the degree that being working class is associated with having lower social status, the expression of such an identity is likely to be associated with attitudes to political issues that are reflective of low status. A similar idea is echoed by Sosnaud *et al.* (2013: 86), who note that working class identity can be associated with lower social status and can therefore be associated with authoritarian or socially conservative preferences (see e.g. Chan and Goldthorpe 2007). In line with this thesis, recent British studies have connected low social status with support for UKIP (Carella and Ford 2020), anti-immigration attitudes and support for Brexit (Evans *et al.* 2022). Chan *et al.* (2020) likewise point to status-related cultural aspects of stratification as a basis of support for Brexit. This perspective on class identity thus connects it to the cultural dimension of politics that differentiates socially authoritarian from socially liberal orientations, typically contrasting traditional moral values and opposition to immigration and the EU, with a socially liberal agenda concerning support for the EU, minority rights and (openness to) immigration (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2019; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Oesch and Rennwald 2018).

The relative importance of these two differing ways in which class identity can impact on political preferences is likely to depend on context. If class is thought of in terms of economic inequality we would expect class identity to be associated with concerns about economic redistribution. If class position is thought of in terms of social status we would expect class identity to be associated with cultural attitudes. In our analysis, we use a cross-national and overtime design to examine the prevalence of economic and cultural interpretations of class identity.

Comparing Britain and Denmark

Our analysis compares two (high/low inequality) North European societies which moved in different directions over the 50-year period we are examining. First, we show how different the two countries are with respect to the distribution of class identities. We then consider the relationship between inequality and differences in class identity, before examining our thesis that perceptions of class in Britain differ from those in Denmark because of their emphasis on cultural distinctions associated with class origins, rather than seeing class position as a consequence of current occupational class.

To illustrate the nature of the differences between Britain and Denmark, Figure 1 shows contemporary levels of class identification in the two countries. The figure is based on a sequence of questions first asking whether or not respondents identify with a particular class, and if so whether it is the middle or working class. The distribution of these responses is shown in the left-hand, unprompted part of the figure. Those who do not identify with a class on the first question are asked whether they would choose the middle or the working class if they had to place themselves in a class. The right-hand panel of the figure adds these prompted responses to the unprompted ones. The stark difference between the countries can clearly be seen. Despite the similarity of the class

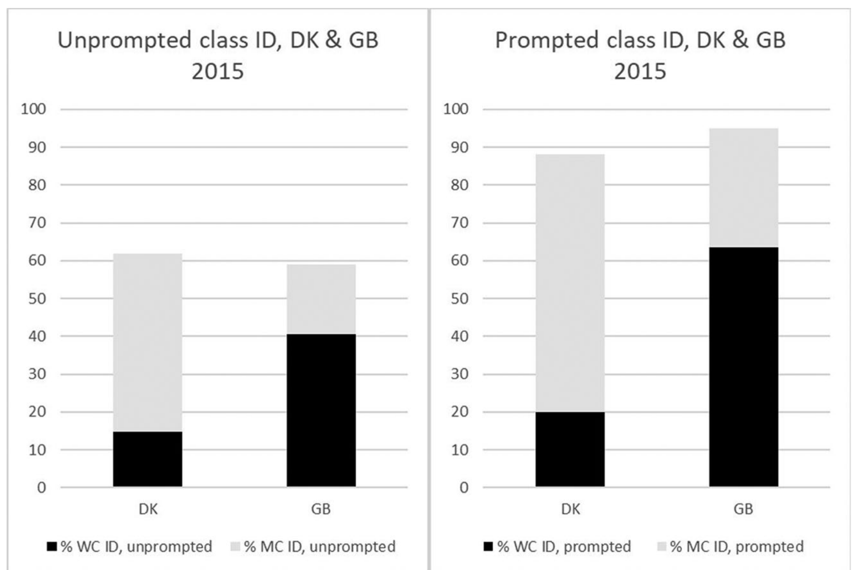

Figure 1. Levels of identification with the working and middle class in Denmark and Britain (per cent). Sources: Denmark: Danish National Election Study, 2015. Britain: BSA 2015. WC, working class; MC, middle class.

structures of Britain and Denmark, British respondents see themselves as far more working class than do Danes.

In order to examine why this might be the case we consider the differences in economic inequality and class culture between these societies.

Inequality

As noted, the comparative literature has pointed to the influence of national level inequality. Since the 1970s and most notably in the 1980s, inequality in Britain has grown substantially (an increase of about 0.1 in the Gini coefficient, cf. Atkinson *et al.* 2017). Britain now has a Gini of 0.35, fifth place among OECD countries. Denmark, in contrast is a substantially more equal society than Britain (Gini = 0.25, lowest among OECD countries), and has seen a decrease in inequality over the same period, by some 0.14 according to Atkinson and Søgaard (2016).[3]

While the issue does not lend itself easily to causal identification strategies, there are observable implications of an inequality perspective that can be examined empirically. If inequality explains why many people in Britain see themselves as working class rather than middle class compared with Denmark, we should see similar levels of over-reporting of being working class in the two countries in the first part of the period, since levels of inequality between Britain and Denmark were similar. From the 1980s onwards, however, Denmark becomes more equal and Britain more unequal. There should therefore be greater differences between the countries in levels of working class over-identification in that period, with the share going up in Britain and down in Denmark.

Culture

There is a long history of class distinctions in Britain, although it is not a uniquely inegalitarian society. What is different is that the British think and talk about social status differences very largely in class terms.[4] These distinctions are not simply historical, although there is considerable historical evidence of their existence (Cannadine 1998; Joyce 1991), rather, as an eminent commentator on the British experience of class observes: 'class distinctions do not die; they merely learn new ways of expressing themselves. Each decade we shiftily declare we have buried class; each decade the coffin stays empty.' (Hoggart 1989). Hence qualitative studies from the 1960s onwards indicate a tendency to see 'class' as meaning snobbishness, social climbing, a desire to divide society into status groups (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2018). So that even talking about class is potentially

socially difficult, as indicated by Savage (2015), who refers to class going 'underground' in late twentieth and early twenty-first century Britain precisely because of its status connotations. Which is not to say that people do not care about or are unable to read such markers of social status (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2018). Most recently, experimental studies on the connection between status and class in Britain indicate a remarkably close parallel in the patterning of the status and class attributions respondents make about others (Evans *et al.* 2021a).

In Britain, therefore, the nature of class distinctions suggests that working class over-identification may result from the influence of class as a cultural phenomenon associated with social status and to some degree rooted in social origins. A class position is not just something a person acquires, they are to some degree born into, or socialised into it, irrespective of any subsequent social mobility. Regardless of where someone ends up in society, how much they earn, what occupation they attain, others will evaluate them, in part, in terms of their social origins, and their class self-concept will thus be shaped by these origins. This is indicated by a body of sociological research on the salience of class as a status characteristic in British society and its accompanying markers of social origins, such as accent and lifestyle, with their implications for cultural and social capital (Bennett *et al.* 2008; Savage 2015), as well as analyses of other cultural aspects of class divisions (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Marwick 1980; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite 2018).

Denmark in contrast is a country characterised by a much weaker class culture, and a less dominant financial and hereditary elite. In their book with the telling title *The Hidden Class Society* (author translation), Faber *et al.* (2012: 178–9) discuss a Scandinavian norm of equality which means that many Danes have a tendency to evade acknowledging or talking about social differences. Instead, the perception is that everyone is – and certainly should be treated as – equal. In contrast to the situation in Britain, hence, class distinctions are much less salient in Danish culture. This is not to say that Danes do not observe class differences (see, e.g. Stubager 2017), but such differences are seen more as the result of individuals' own efforts and abilities than as a hereditary, or socialization-based phenomenon (see also Harrits and Pedersen 2018; Harrits and Stubager 2019; Robison and Stubager 2018).

The differing character of class perceptions in the two societies can be seen in specially commissioned surveys (Stubager *et al.* 2018) that include open-ended questions about what the 'upper class', 'middle class' and 'working class' mean to respondents in both countries. These show substantial differences between the two societies. Danes describe class in terms of occupational, income and educational characteristics to a substantially greater degree than the British. No less than 46% of Danes

refer to class in specifically occupational terms whereas in Britain only 26% mention occupation. Amongst Danes, 71% use classic SES indicators (occupation, income and education) to refer to class compared to only 51% of British respondents. In contrast, references to notions of class in terms of social origins, personality and character are noticeably more prevalent amongst the British: twice as many refer to background, personality and character, compared to the Danes (23% versus 11%). This is particularly pronounced for depictions of the upper class: 42% of the British refer to personality and background compared with only 17% of Danes. In marked contrast, for the upper class only 9% of the British refer to occupation compared with 34% of Danes. In short, compared with Danish respondents, British respondents are far more likely to refer to cultural and status characteristics when considering the meaning of class.

From the cultural perspective we should therefore find evidence of a more ascriptive class culture in Britain, resulting in continued identification with their class of origin by middle class people from working class origins. Because of the changing class structure accompanying the transition from industrial to post-industrial society, the latter represent the vast majority of social mobility cases from the post-war era through to the end of the twentieth century (Breen 2004). This could therefore account for the large size of the subjective working class compared with the occupational working class.

Denmark should however display a pattern of class identification where people tend to use their current occupation instead of their class origin as the basis of their class identity. The lessened salience of class background in the Danish case should be associated with lower levels of working class over-identification than in Britain. In this sense, Denmark should be similar to other countries where, if anything, it is a middle class identity that is over-claimed (D'Hooge *et al.* 2018).

We examine these observable implications of our argument by estimating the impact of parental class on respondents' class self-identification from 1970 to 2015, net of respondents' current occupational class. Our expectation is that the relationship between class origins and identity in Britain should be consistently stronger than in Denmark, and since cultural differences are expected to be persistent rather than transient, these differences should be found throughout the time period we are examining.

If the cultural argument holds, it further implies that the politics of class identity should also differ between the two countries. British class culture, in which an individual's class identity may derive to a considerable extent from their class of origin, leads us to expect Britain's working class identifiers to hold more particularistic attitudes. For Denmark, in contrast, class identity is linked more closely with an individual's

current economic circumstances and so we expect to see a difference between an economically left-leaning working class and a more right-leaning middle class.

Analysis

A long-term difference?

We first examine levels of working/middle class identification in Britain and Denmark across time. The measure of class identity introduced in Figure 1 is available in Britain from 1970 to 2015[5] while for Denmark it is available from 1971 to 1994 as well as in 2015. We supplement the Danish data with the 1997–2001 and 2009 waves of the ISSP that also include a measure of class identification. See Online Appendix A for information about the data. The pattern of overtime development for each country appears in Figure 2, which shows the combined percentage of prompted and unprompted responses (see the discussion of Figure 1) while we exclude those who did not pick a class identity.[6] The figure shows that levels of total class identification have remained fairly constant in Denmark. What has changed is the growth of a middle class identity and a decline in working class identity. This corresponds with changes in the Danish occupational structure in its transition from an industrial society to post-industrialism.

For Britain, the overwhelming impression is instead one of remarkable constancy. For the whole period, 30–40% of British people identify as middle class and 60–70% identify as working class. This stability persists despite the substantial changes in the occupational structure – particularly the growth of middle class managerial, professional and semi-professional occupations – that have taken place during this period.

Changing class structure, changing inequality and changing class identities?

Since changes in levels of working/middle class identification can be expected to be driven at least partly by changes in objective class structure, we need a measure of the discrepancy between objective and subjective class that estimates the extent of over- or under-identification, taking into account changes in the sizes of classes. We do this by calculating the difference between objective class membership (using the Goldthorpe class schema, Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992) and subjective class identification separately for the working and middle class. We classify as 'correctly' identified the percentage of (skilled and unskilled) manual workers who identify as working class and the percentage of

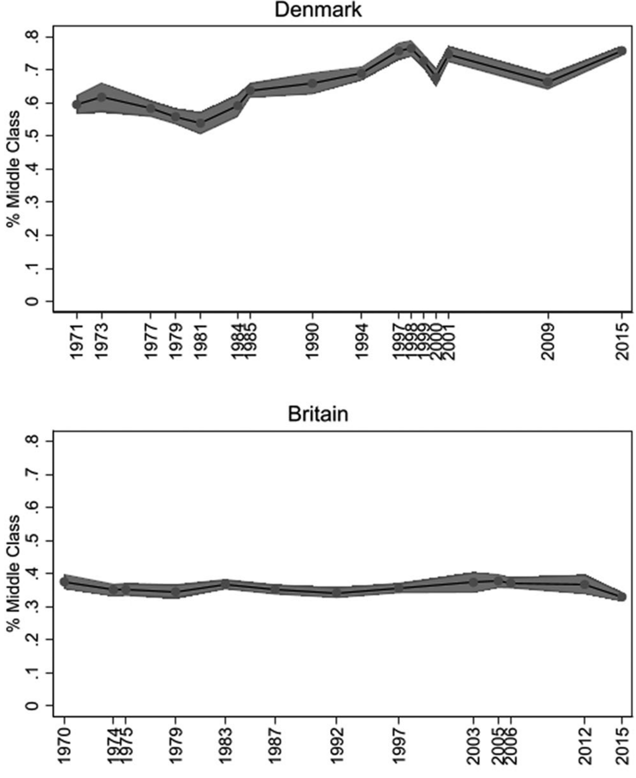

Figure 2. Class identification in Denmark and Britain, 1970–2015. Per cent middle class identifiers. Note: The figures show the percentage (with 95% confidence intervals) of middle class identifiers among respondents who pick a working or middle class identity either unprompted or when prompted. See Online Appendix A for the data.

non-manual workers who identify as middle class.[7] Due to their unclear objective class location, we exclude the relatively small numbers of self-employed from this analysis. The changes in this measure of 'correct' versus 'incorrect' class identification for objectively manual and non-manual classes over the 1970–2015 period are shown in Figure 3, which also includes trends in the Gini coefficient in both countries. There is a gradual decline in inequality during this period in Denmark and a modest one-step increase in inequality in Britain in the 1980s.[8]

In Denmark, with the exception of the period around 1980, there are lower levels of accurate self-placement for the working class (around 50%) and higher levels for the middle class (between 60% and over 80%). These differences accentuate from the mid-1990s onwards. In contrast, the British figure shows that no less than 80% of British workers identify as working class across the entire period. At the same time, only about

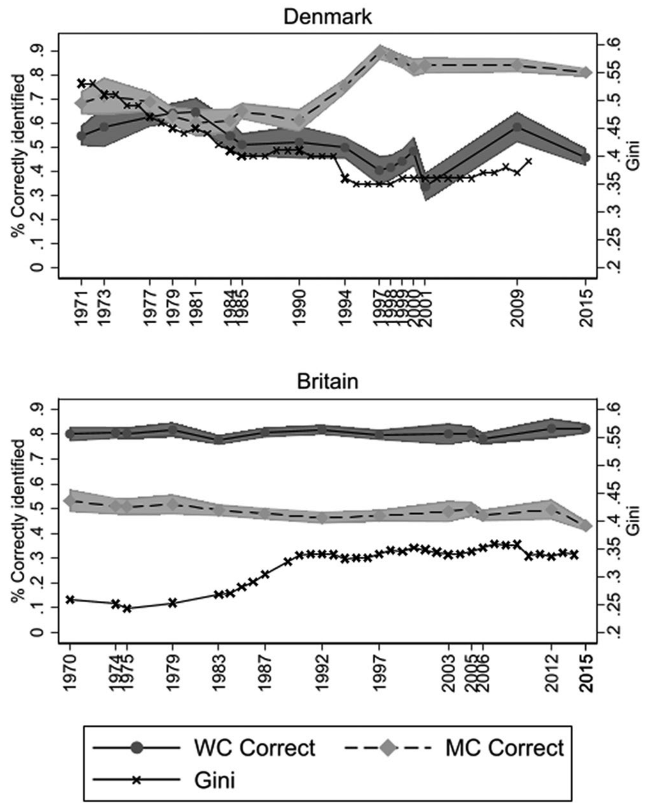

Figure 3. 'Correct' class identification and inequality in Denmark and Britain, 1970–2015, per cent and Gini coefficient. Note: The figures show the percentage of skilled and unskilled manual workers who identify as working class, the percentage of non-manual workers who identify as middle class (all with 95% confidence intervals) as well as values of the Gini coefficient for Denmark and Britain. Gini figures are taken from Atkinson and Søgaard (2016) for Denmark and from Atkinson *et al.* (2017) for Britain. See Online Appendix A for the survey data.

50–55% of non-manuals identify as middle class in the early 1970s, which reduces slightly, to around 45–50%, at the very end of the period. For Britain, there appears to be no connection at all between inequality and the percentage of correct identifiers, otherwise we would have seen a pronounced change in the latter following the increase in inequality in the 1980s.

In general, the pattern of relative stability in working class over-identification indicates that inequality is probably not the reason why Denmark and Britain differ in such patterns. There is, additionally, suggestive evidence that working class identification becomes relatively less accurate than middle class identification in Denmark in recent years, and by implication that middle class over-identification has increased.

This change, which occurs during a period of lower inequality, is potentially consistent with the thesis that in Denmark class identification has more of an economic basis than in Britain. Similarly, the lack of any correspondence between changes in inequality at the macro-level and patterns of class identification in Britain suggests that economic inequality may have a weak influence on class identification at the individual level, when compared with Denmark. To examine this possibility, we modelled the individual-level relationship between income and class identity, net of other factors, in the two countries. The findings reported in Online Appendix B show that as predicted, even in a model with current class, father's class, gender, age and education included, income inequality has a somewhat stronger relationship with class identity in Denmark than in Britain.

In summary, the differences between Britain and Denmark in the propensity to express a working class versus middle class identity are long-standing. They have no relationship with the increase in inequality in Britain. The lesser relevance of economic inequality to British class identity is also indicated by supplementary analysis at the individual level, while there is some suggestive evidence that Danish macro-patterns of class identity may also be more resource-related.[9]

Social origins and current circumstances

We next track the influence of family background on class identity over time in both countries. This tests our argument concerning the ascriptive versus attained nature of class identity in Britain and Denmark. If this thesis is valid, we should expect a substantial and stable relationship between class background and class identity in Britain and a weaker relationship in Denmark throughout the period.

The influence of father's occupation is illustrated by the difference in the predicted level of middle class identification between those whose father was an unskilled worker and those whose father was higher non-manual (~higher professionals in the EGP-scheme) as these are, in most years, the two polar opposites.[10] We use binomial logit to model the relationship, thereby leaving out those not identifying with either the middle or working classes.[11] In Denmark, our data contains information about both class identity and father's occupation for 1971, 1979, 1981, 1984, 2009 and 2015. For Britain, class identity and class background are available in the BES surveys from 1970 to 1997, and in the BSA surveys in 2003, 2005 and 2015.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between father's class and class identification when current class is controlled for – shown by the unbroken

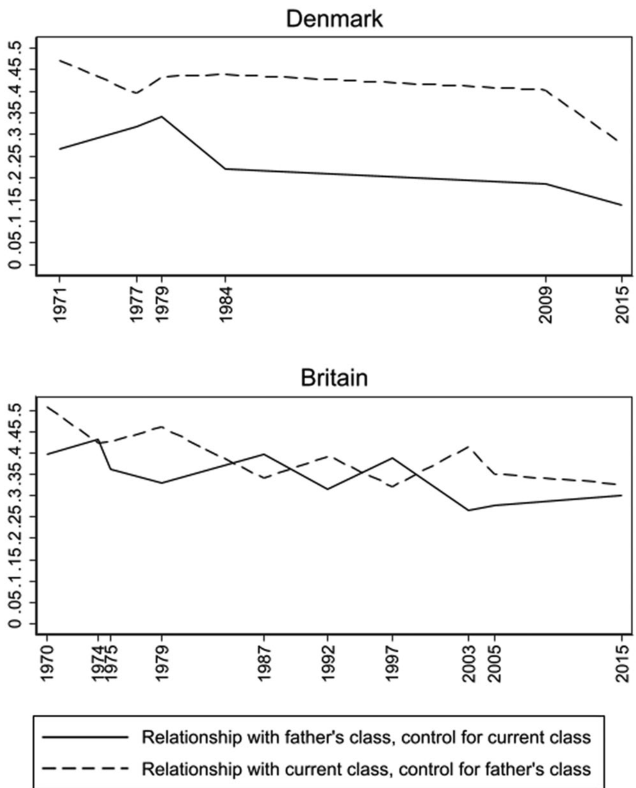

Figure 4. The influence of individuals' own and their father's class on class identity in Denmark and Britain, 1970–2015, per cent. Note: The figures show the difference in the predicted probability (based on logit models estimated for each year separately) of identifying with the working class between (1) those occupied as unskilled workers or in a higher non-manual position while controlling for their father's occupation and (2) those whose father was occupied as an unskilled worker or in a higher non-manual position while controlling for their own current occupation.

line – and vice versa, shown by the dashed line (see Online Appendix E for the model coefficients and for models controlling for education). There is some evidence of a possible small decline in the strength of the relationships in both countries. Although given the limited data points, especially in Denmark, this is not definitive. More noticeable are the comparisons between the two countries in the strength of the relationship between class identification and class origin versus current class.

In Britain the relationship between class identification and father's class controlling for the respondent's current class varies from 40–50 percentage points to around 30 percentage points. The strength of the relationship between identity and current class controlling for father's class varies from just under 50 percentage points to the mid-30s. The

overall pattern is of a high degree of similarity in the strength of the relationships for class origins and class destinations. In Denmark, the parallel figure for father's class controlling for current class starts at 25–35 percentage points and drops to just under 20. For current class controlling for father's class the relationship is far stronger: varying between just under 50 percentage points and just under 40.

These results provide support for the cultural interpretation of class identity differences. Across the whole of the period, class of origin is roughly as important as current class for British class identity, while Danes consistently rely much more on their current class than that of their father for their sense of class identity. Which is what we would expect if class is more status-based in Britain and more closely linked to economic circumstances in Denmark.

The impact of class identity on political preferences

Evidence on the different sources of class identification in Britain and Denmark provides grounds for expecting a difference between them in the political implications of class identity. To examine this we next model the association between class identities and redistributive and particularistic political attitudes.

We include in our models various controls. Firstly, individuals' objective class (measured as before by the EGP-scheme, distinguishing between, unskilled and skilled manual workers, and lower and higher non-manual workers). Secondly education, which has been found to strongly influence political preferences concerning cultural conservatism (Evans *et al.* 1996; Langsæther and Stubager 2019; Napier and Jost 2008; Stubager 2008), and is operationalised as a set of dummy variables capturing significant break-points in attainment in the two countries.

In the British case, we distinguish between degree-level qualifications and having left school at the minimum age (14 until 1947, 15 until 1972 and 16 afterwards), or gained no qualifications. These groups form the top and bottom of our education categories. Between these, the key distinctions we make are between people with some higher educational training (such as teacher training or nursing), those leaving school with A-Levels (at 18, or vocational equivalents), and those leaving school before 17/18 but with more than minimum qualifications, having obtained GCSE or O Levels.

In Denmark, where schooling is also compulsory up until 16 (13 until 1972), we distinguish between the minimum school leaving age, vocational education and three levels of tertiary education. The term used in the Danish system to differentiate between different levels of such education is 'cycles'. Short cycles are mostly of a rather specific, vocation directed

nature (taken on top of a vocational education, i.e. typically without attending high school), the medium cycles are nurses, school teachers and the like, while the long cycles involve university degrees (a high school education is a prerequisite to entering the two latter levels). They are thus similar to the distinctions made in the British case. Gender and age (coded into six categories, 16–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69 and 70+) are also included in the models though they are not shown in the tables. We first analyse the relationship (net of gender and age) between occupation and class identity (coded as either working or middle class as in Figure 1) and attitudes, then add education.

Our dependent variables are also chosen to be as similar as possible in the two countries. For attitudes towards redistribution in Britain we use the extent to which respondents agree that 'Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off' (with the five-point response scale recoded to range from 1, strongly disagree to 0, strongly agree). In Denmark we use a similar Likert-item asking about agreement with the statement that 'High incomes should be taxed more than is the case today', with responses coded as in Britain. For particularistic attitudes, in Britain we use responses to the statement that: 'on a scale of 0 to 10, would you say that Britain's cultural life is generally undermined or enriched by migrants coming to live here from other countries?' (coded 0–1, with 1 as the most anti-immigrant response). In Denmark, we use responses to the Likert-item 'Immigration constitutes a serious threat to Danish culture'. Similarly coded 0–1. 'Don't know' responses are excluded for all items.

Table 1 shows the findings for Denmark. A working class identity is robustly associated with endorsement of redistribution. Controls for occupational class or education have no impact on the relationship between class identity and preferences for redistribution and no significant influence net of class identity. The link between occupational class – the contrast between semi-skilled manual workers and the higher non-manual class – and attitudes is fully mediated by the inclusion of class identity. The lack of a relationship between education and redistribution contrasts with its very strong relationship with immigration attitudes, with which class identity has no significant relationship – even when education is left out of the model. The relationship between occupational class and immigration attitudes seen in models V and VI, furthermore, is entirely a result of education differences, as becomes clear in models VII and VIII.

For Britain, Table 2 shows a very different picture. Here, objective class is related to redistributive preferences while subjective class is not, and the same pattern holds when controlling for education (see models I–IV). Objective class and subjective class are both strongly related to immigration attitudes, even when controlling for each other's influence.

Table 1. Class identification and attitudes to redistribution and immigration in Denmark, 2015, regression estimates.

	Redistribution				Immigration			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V	Model VI	Model VII	Model VIII
	Objective class	Objective and subjective class	Objective class + education	Obj. and subj. class + education	Objective class	Objective and subjective class	Objective class + education	Obj. and subj. class + education
Skilled worker	−0.01	−0.03	−0.01	−0.03	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Lower non-manuals	0.04	−0.02	0.04	−0.00	−0.14***	−0.14***	−0.02	−0.03
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Higher non-manuals	0.11**	0.02	0.12**	0.06	−0.18***	−0.18***	0.04	0.02
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Working class identity		−0.17***		−0.18***		−0.00		−0.05
		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)		(0.03)
Vocational education			0.01	−0.03			−0.04	−0.05
			(0.04)	(0.04)			(0.04)	(0.04)
Short cycle tertiary education			0.11*	0.06			−0.18***	−0.19***
			(0.05)	(0.05)			(0.05)	(0.05)
Medium cycle tertiary education			0.00	−0.06			−0.29***	−0.31***
			(0.05)	(0.05)			(0.05)	(0.05)
Long cycle tertiary education			−0.01	−0.08			−0.38***	−0.40***
			(0.05)	(0.05)			(0.05)	(0.06)
Observations	908	908	908	908	926	926	926	926
Adjusted R^2	0.057	0.099	0.065	0.108	0.082	0.081	0.170	0.172

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The models also include controls for gender and age as well as a constant; these coefficients are not shown. Reference categories are unskilled worker, middle class identity, and no education beyond compulsory school.

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Table 2. Class identification and attitudes to redistribution and immigration in Britain, 2015, regression estimates.

	Redistribution				Immigration			
	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V	Model VI	Model VII	Model VIII
	Objective class	Objective and subjective class	Objective class + education	Obj. and subj. class + education	Objective class	Objective and subjective class	Objective class + education	Obj. and subj. class + education
Skilled worker	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00	0.00	0.03	0.02	0.05	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Lower non-manuals	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.05	−0.05	−0.03	0.04	0.04
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Higher non-manuals	0.08*	0.08*	0.11**	0.11**	−0.12***	−0.09**	−0.01	−0.01
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Working class identity		−0.02		−0.03		0.10***		0.06**
		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)		(0.02)
More than minimum			0.02	0.02			−0.07*	−0.06*
			(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.03)	(0.03)
A-levels			0.01	−0.00			−0.14***	−0.13***
			(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.03)	(0.03)
Some higher education			−0.07	−0.07			−0.16***	−0.15***
			(0.05)	(0.05)			(0.05)	(0.05)
Degree			−0.06*	−0.07*			−0.21***	−0.19***
			(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.02)	(0.03)
Observations	802	802	802	802	909	909	909	909
Adjusted R^2	0.009	0.009	0.016	0.017	0.051	0.078	0.125	0.133

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. The models also include controls for gender and age as well as a constant; these coefficients are not shown. Reference categories are unskilled worker, middle class identity, and no education beyond compulsory school.

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

However, once education is controlled for, the relationship between objective class and immigration attitudes is non-significant, while subjective class remains important (although, predictably, with a smaller magnitude).

To summarise: in Britain, where class is rooted more in ascriptive status, class identity is unrelated to redistribution attitudes but related to particularistic attitudes: with those who identify with the working class expressing more right-wing views. In Denmark, where class is related more strongly to current class position, we see the opposite pattern, with a working class identity being associated with support for redistribution and having no association with particularistic attitudes.

Conclusions

As Bornschier *et al.* (2021: 2) have observed: 'integrating social identities into the study of electoral politics offers a framework for studying the interplay of "economic" and "cultural" drivers of electoral behaviour'. In this article, we have provided evidence that the relationship between class identity and political choice involves both economic and cultural factors, which differ cross-nationally.

A key feature of the long-standing differences between the two countries examined here is in the extent to which class identity is ascriptive, or attained. In Britain, there is a strong influence of social origins on current class identification across the entire time period we have examined. This provides evidence for why the British are, by international standards, unusually working class in their self-identification, despite the post-industrial transformation of the class structure over the last 50 or more years. In contrast, Danish patterns of class identity have tracked the changing shape of the post-industrial class structure, much as US class identity has done over a similar period (Hout 2008), and thus displays higher levels of middle class identification in general and in the middle class itself. Indeed, Denmark arguably displays a tendency for people to see themselves as more middle class than would be expected on the basis of objective class positions, a feature of some other European societies (D'Hooge *et al.* 2018).

Consistent with this economic versus cultural conception of class position, class identity has somewhat different political implications in the two countries: In Denmark, the affirmation of a working class identity is more a statement about the politics of inequality and where someone stands on this dimension. The relatively modest relationship between objective class and such attitudes is fully mediated by their far stronger relationship with class identity. But class identity is unrelated to immigration attitudes, where education is instead the primary influence. In Britain, this same affirmation of identity is more of a statement about

the politics of culture and where someone stands on that dimension. Objective class matters for attitudes towards redistribution, but not for immigration attitudes. Whereas class identity, as well as education, matters for particularistic attitudes.

Our interpretation of these different patterns focuses on the different sources and meaning of class identification in the two societies. For one, Denmark, it is about class as occupation and for the other, Britain, it concerns class as a marker of social position in a society where class distinctions of a cultural form are more prevalent and social origins have a stronger impact on class identification. These findings and interpretations are consistent with panel analyses of British data showing that upward social mobility is accompanied by updating of economic redistributive preferences (Ares 2020), whereas cultural values and class identity do not change (Langsæther *et al.* 2021), and with the findings of research into cultural and status-related aspects of stratification and politics in Britain (Carella and Ford 2020; Chan *et al.* 2020; Evans *et al.* 2022).

There are of course further unanswered questions revealed by an exploratory study of this type. We cannot easily find causal identification strategies to test the explanations examined here, so we have instead derived observable implications from these competing perspectives and seen which are borne out and which are not. Thus, we need to temper claims concerning cause, rather than association. Likewise, the comparative and overtime analysis has allowed us to assess the implications of inequality for class and its link with identity, but only in a limited way. Levels of inequality have changed substantially in the period examined with no theoretically predicted association with changes in patterns of class identity, at least in the British case. As we would expect, however, there are indications of such a relationship in Denmark. Individual-level analysis also provides some support for these macro-differences. None the less, further research is clearly needed to explore this issue in more depth than the current analysis has enabled.

Other findings are also worthy of further investigation. In recent years, the Danish middle class appears to have developed a more clearly middle class self-concept, displaying somewhat higher levels of correct class identification than in the 1980s and before. This makes the contrast between the British and Danish middle classes even more stark, given the former's strikingly lower levels of middle class identification. Quite why these classes are diverging in this way is not known. We also saw that over time there was suggestive evidence of a slightly weakening relationship between class origins, current class and identity in both countries – although from rather different starting points. Should it persist, this decoupling of objective and subjective class could in time

lead to class identity having a potentially more significant net influence on political preferences in both countries, as it would be less constrained by objective class position. Again, this remains to be examined.

There is also the thorny question of how cultural differences in the meaning of class identification emerge historically. Scheve and Stasavage (2016) for example show how historical differences in taxation regimes between Scandinavia and other regions can be traced back to the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, without relevant historical data on class identity, we cannot delve back into the pre-1960s. Thus, it is possible that historic economic developments may have influenced the emergence of these national cultural differences, although questions of endogeneity inevitably pervade analyses of such entangled historical trajectories. Similar considerations might apply to other factors such as historic differences in the educational systems in the countries. Cultural differences at a given point in time might reflect a range of historical developments that have helped to consolidate them.

The reciprocal dynamics of material and cultural influences lies at the heart of sociological interpretative arguments from Marx and Weber onwards, producing questions that may not be answerable in the foreseeable future. For now, however, we can at least suggest that ongoing studies of the effects of social class on political preferences would benefit from incorporating subjective as well as objective measures of social class. Moreover, researchers should not include class identity in pooled cross-national models of political preference and voting without estimating the potentially varying nature of its effects.[12] Research that enables economic and cultural aspects of subjective class to be differentiated in comparative analysis should further enhance our understanding of the politics of class identity.

Finally, to return to our political focus. In an era of right-wing populism, much scholarly debate concerns the degree to which cultural divisions between classes have replaced economic ones as sources of political preferences. If class is primarily about resources and related grievances, then politics is likely to remain structured by the historic division between rich and poor. Correspondingly, as the proportion of working class occupations has declined, the electoral importance of occupational class has weakened. If, on the other hand, class is more subjective and cultural, then it is likely to provide a basis for cultural politics. And in Britain at least, the subjective working class – unlike the objective working class – is not in numerical decline. The conservative cultural orientation associated with a working class identity creates the possibility of its alignment with the Conservative Party – as in the 2019 general election when a combination of social conservativism, Brexit support, and a charismatic leader enabled the party to take many formerly Labour

voting working class constituencies (Evans *et al.* 2021b; Evans and Mellon 2020). In this sense, the cultural nature of class identity in conjunction with the prevalence of a working class identification has probably helped to drive political realignment in British politics.

In Denmark, in contrast, working class identification continues to be associated with preferences for economic redistribution without simultaneously exerting any influence on attitudes towards immigration. The subjective working class, in other words, constitutes a constituency for traditional class politics of the kind known for most of the twentieth Century. But this is a shrinking constituency. The share of the electorate professing a working class identity is declining over time. This is not only driven by the identification with the middle class of around half of the Danes that are objectively working class, but also by the declining share of the electorate belonging to the latter. And although identification with the working class by those objectively in the middle class is associated with left-wing attitudes towards redistribution, this group is rather small. The implication, hence, is that the constituency for redistributive policies is shrinking which may, ceteris paribus, put support for the generous Danish welfare state under pressure (Stubager *et al.* 2021).

Notes

1. These studies use an unlabelled 0–10 scale of subjective social position as their measure of class identity, which leaves the meaning of responses open to conjecture.
2. Though working class authoritarianism needs to be distinguished from that related to lower levels of educational attainment (see e.g. Napier and Jost 2008).
3. Unfortunately, the Danish Gini figures prior to 1987 are only available from Atkinson and Søgaard (2016) who use a slightly different basis than does the OECD. The Atkinson and Søgaard Gini is based on individual, taxable income unadjusted for family size which is why it differs from the OECD Gini which is based on families' (adjusted for size) disposable income.
4. Although a focus on distinctions between classes is typically associated with Bourdieu (1984), others have pointed to similar boundary drawing practices (Parkin 1979).
5. Class identity is available in Britain also in 1964 and 1966. For comparability, however, we begin the analysis in 1970.
6. For Denmark, the share of respondents not choosing a class hovers between 8% and 22%. For Britain, it lies in the range of 5–6%.
7. Note that if we instead calculate the percentage of respondents who 'do not get it wrong' – by including don't knows, non-identified, etc. with those who get it right – it has no effect on the results.
8. The Gini coefficient for Denmark is taken from Atkinson and Søgaard (2016) – see Endnote 3 for more information – as it enables a longer time

comparison than available OECD Gini figures. However, its absolute levels differ from those presented in the British figure and cannot therefore be compared. Importantly, where there are comparable measures between OECD figures and these figures, they suggest a similar trend.

9. In Online Appendix C, we also investigate the potential impact of political mobilization on changes in class identification. As can be seen in the appendix, this explanation is also not supported by the rather limited available evidence.
10. We rely on father's – rather than mother's – class given its general availability across all time points in both countries. We did however check to see if there were significant differences between father's and mother's class in relationships with respondent's class identity using surveys that included measures of both father's and mother's occupational class. This robustness test is presented in Online Appendix D. These models find stronger effects for father's class on class identity than for mothers. Also, mothers are more likely not to have any occupational class.
11. Wald tests of the significance of the block of coefficients representing either father's or respondents' own class are clearly significant in all years although only at p = .048 for father's class in Denmark in 2015. The pseudo-R^2's for the Danish models range from .19 to .27 in 1971–2009, but drops to .13 in 2015. For Britain, the pseudo-R^2's vary between .12 and .15 with a slight downward tendency.
12. A point noted in passing by D'Hooge *et al.* (2018: 82) 'a more in-depth focus on country differences in regards to class discordance and voting is a relevant endeavor given our results indicating differences'.

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