PART I
THE CREATION OF FORMAL STRUCTURES
Chapter 4

Constructing the Modern Career,
1840-1940

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Introduction

By the later twentieth century, the idea that careers are defining features of middle-class life is utterly familiar. Sociologists such as John Goldthorpe (1982, 1995) have argued that in modern industrial societies an expectation of prospective incremental rewards distinguishes the increasingly large numbers of salaried professional and managerial middle classes from the manual working class and routine white collar and service workers. Economists have explored how the development of internal labour markets secures firm specific human capital in an increasingly skill based economy (Osterman, 1984). Such is the dominance of the idea of the career that social psychologists such as Levinson (1978) tend to see a close match between men’s career progress and their own journey through the seasons of their life.¹ And yet, the historical origins of the career are remarkably little known. We know that the idea of the career only develops from the mid-nineteenth century, as the term is re-defined from its original meaning - turbulent, un-coordinated movement – to its more modern meaning of orderly progress through structured sequences during the later nineteenth century (Williams, 1977). In the same way that Benjamin (1973) sees value in excavating the pre-history of cultural objects that later come to pre-eminence, we seek in this paper to unravel the ‘murky past’ of the career. This will allow us to show how traces of its origins might still be present in its contemporary manifestations, even though such traces are now buried and rarely acknowledged.

Indeed, so common, yet so unacknowledged, is the idea of the career, that its deep theoretical implications are rarely pursued.² One important, though largely neglected issue in pursuing the historical analysis of the career is to recognise the tension between the career and the occupation as alternative ways of categorizing social structure. Due to Szreter’s (1993, 1996) research we know how occupational

¹ Levinson’s book is entitled *The seasons of a man’s life* and does not – controversially – consider the experience of women.

² The main exception here is the symbolic interactionist tradition of sociology that has given the concept of career a major role in its social theory. See Abbott (2000).
categories were formed during the later nineteenth centuries in ways that encoded the values and concerns of Victorian gentlemen professionals. Szreter shows how the very idea of class came to be crystallized around groupings of occupations, and indicates how it broke with other ways of thinking about social division - based around status, title and so forth. The legacies of this nineteenth century revolution in thinking are still with us, notably in sociological debates regarding the value of different occupational class schema (see e.g. Marshall et al, 1988; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Pevalin and Rose, 2003; Savage et al, 1992; Butler and Savage eds. 1995). However, it might be noted that in this process of seeing classes as bundles of occupations, an alternative way of thinking of class formation, as clusters of sequences or trajectories, has been largely hidden from view. In view of the increasingly widely recognised limitation of occupational class schema, and particularly the difficulty of relating occupational class-to-class identity and action (see Savage, 2000), perhaps we need to see how particular types of sequences come to be associated with certain forms of class identity. This paper therefore takes further the argument that social history and sociology needs to become more sensitive to questions of time by exploring the historical construction of career routes and pathways and examining how class identities are related to such developments. This develops recent efforts to make debates about social mobility central to the study of social history (Miles and Vincent, 1993; Savage, 1994; Savage and Miles, 1994; Miles, 1999). In the context of this paper our aim is to develop our understanding of social relationships so that these are not understood as static in one particular moment in time, but are seen as involving both the products of the past and an anticipated life ‘trajectory’. Here we take trajectory in a very broad sense to include both movement over the course of one’s entire life, and also in terms of the regular routines adopted in day-to-day life. Ways of organising time, and connecting pasts, presents and futures, can be seen in this broad view as fundamental to understandings about social change. This paper is therefore a preliminary attempt to reflect both on how the career was historically formed, but also how it has been subordinated in important ways to the occupation.

We begin by exploring theoretical and historiographical issues before turning to the heart of our paper which draws on research based upon the changing patterns of job movement between around 1850 and 1950 in four leading nineteenth-century organizations. Our analysis is based on data from between 2000 and 4000 employees who began working between the 1840s and 1940s in each of three case-study organizations – the Great Western Railway, Lloyds Bank, and the Post Office. A third second section sketches out the rudiments of four different case studies from which our career data originate. In the fourth section we explore the changing structure and

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3 The original research formed part of an ESRC-funded project ‘Pathways and Prospects: the Emergence of the Modern Bureaucratic career in Britain, 1870-1940’, which was directed by Andrew Miles, Mike Savage and David Vincent. The project employed Hiranthi Jayaweera as Research Fellow. The main data sources used were employment records. These data were supplemented by information from parliamentary papers, company publications and histories, marriage registers, oral histories and autobiographies.
cultural connotations of the career, and in the fifth we examine patterns of career mobility.

**Theoretical Perspectives on the Emergence of Career Ladders**

Recent economic and social history has continued to emphasise the ‘slowness’ of British economic development from the nineteenth century. Influential interpretations of Cain and Hopkins (1993), Cannadine (1980), Weiner (1981), and Rubinstein (1987) have all emphasised the persistence of gentlemanly practices, often based on rural models, down through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Yet these accounts tend to ignore the creeping modernity of British economic development, and the extent to which modern large-scale organizations played an increasingly significant role in the UK over the period as a whole. In considering the emergence of modern career processes, it is useful to reflect on theoretical models developed mainly in other national contexts. Four perspectives seem especially important.

*The human capital model.* For Weber (1978), the career was a generic feature of a modern society. In modern societies, based on rational authority, it was essential to ensure that those individuals in positions of power would not be inclined to use such positions for self-aggrandisement. The ‘career’ was the rational solution to this problem. By emphasising to individual employees that they could expect to be moved between jobs they would come not to treat any one job as a sinecure but would be more likely to develop a ‘vocational’ orientation to their work. The ‘career’ hence facilitated an impersonal, rationalised mode of administration by new legions of bureaucratic employees. The implication of this argument is that the ‘career’ is a by-product of a modern bureaucracy, and has emerged in tandem with modernity itself. This sort of perspective has been taken up by Chandler (1977) and others who see the career manager as emerging alongside the large business enterprise. In this, the history of one can only be written alongside the history of the other. The career is fundamentally a device to secure efficiency and organizational cohesion, a way of knitting together large, complex organizations, and its emergence is linked closely to the expansion administrative forms of white-collar employment itself. This model therefore tends not to accord any specific importance to the career itself, but rather focuses on the general process of bureaucratization.

Weber was clear that the ‘career’ was largely a prerogative of the middle classes, but the logic of his argument can be extended so that any organization might endeavour to place its entire staff on career lines. This argument has been developed, for instance, by economists interested in examining how career progress can be related to ‘human capital’ considerations. Internal labour markets are devices that encourage all kinds of workers to gain skills (since they are rewarded for acquiring more competences). Certainly, many manual workers during the nineteenth century had some sorts of structured job mobility - whether these were railway workers (Howlett and Johnson, 1995), cotton spinners (Savage, 1989) or flint glass workers (Matsumura, 1982). In this type of work the links between the elaboration of the career and the middle classes is at the very least indirect. Any worker with prized
skills can be expected to be motivated by the prospective rewards of the internal labour market, and the development of career ladders might be expected to cut across class lines as much as to reinforce them.

The surveillance model. Another approach argues that the construction of careers is linked to the emergence of new forms of labour control, and therefore represents the increasing power of employers over their workforces. This argument has a variety of intonations however. Within radical economics, American writers such as Stone (1974), Richards (1979), and Gordon et al. (1982) have argued that bureaucratic control, involving the elaboration of job ladders and career hierarchies, develops in twentieth century firms as a device for labour control. Given the fact that manual workers are frequently the source of resistance in enterprises, it seems more likely that internal labour markets are devised as much for manual as non-manual workers, as Stone (1974) argues.

A recent variant of this view can also be derived from Foucault’s arguments that modern techniques of ‘capillary’ power operate through the elaboration of techniques of bodily control and through the construction of new forms of ‘self-monitoring’ subjectivity. Surveillance operates on the ‘body’ and on the ‘soul’, and the construction of the ‘career’ could be seen as an exemplary example of this process. Admittedly, Foucault himself does not talk much about the career, and his account of surveillance shifts (see Savage, 1998). Thus, in Discipline and Punish (1977) Foucault’s emphasis is upon the construction of new disciplinary techniques designed to regiment and control bodies, focusing particularly on new forms of punishment. New disciplines ‘made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed on them a relation of docility-utility... the human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it’ (Foucault, 1977, pp. 137, 138). Crucial to all these techniques are various forms of inspection, as developed especially in the military (see also Dandeker, 1990). By the time he came to write A History of Sexuality (1979), however, his emphasis had shifted more to the construction of subjectivities and in particular how modern power relationships depended on the need to construct one’s self through processes of confession.

Although Foucault himself nowhere attempts to consider how the ‘career’ can be examined ‘genealogically’, there are a number of prima facie reasons for considering that it might be a highly pertinent case, particularly as a means of thinking about the inter-relationship between new forms of bodily discipline and new subjectivities, and therefore as providing a bridge between the two aspects of modern power relationships elaborated by Foucault. The elaboration of the ‘career’ can be seen as depending both on the construction of forms of inspection, examination and control to regulate job movements and to decide who should be promoted, but also the construction of particular forms of ‘selfhood’, as individual employees themselves come to recognise the ‘career’ as something which they should engage in (see generally, Savage, 1998).

Perhaps the important feature of Foucault’s work is the way he is generally critical of class-based explanations of social and historical change. His focus is not on how
surveillance divides social groups into distinct classes, but how it individualises and fragments. This is a theme taken up by writers such as Nikolaus Rose (1985, 1990) who have explored the emergence of new forms of subjectivity and identity (or ‘knowledge, power and self’, as rehearsed by Kelley, 1994). Rose’s account of how technologies of the ‘self’ have been deployed in the modern workplace has little to say about the role of the career, but Grey (1994) has examined the way that the career has been constructed as a ‘project of the self’ in the contemporary accounting profession, drawing attention to the way that young recruits are encouraged to ‘play the game’ and develop networks as a means of advancing their ‘careers’, and hence how the internalization of an individualistic ‘career ethos’ plays a key normalizing role within the profession.

The cultural framing model. A third perspective, mentioned by DiPrete (1987) as a critique of the human capital approach, emphasizes that different sorts of career ladders can be related to different cultural contexts. Careers are designed in ways that fit cultural understandings of appropriate types of movement between jobs. In order to understand their development it is best not to focus on their possible economic rationality, or their functional use for surveillance, but the way they are embedded in cultural frames. In his study of the Federal Civil Service in the US, DiPrete contrasts a number of ways in which internal labour markets were organised. It was emphasized, for example, that senior tasks should be reserved for those with the appropriate qualifications and therefore a dual labour market was endorsed which distinguished – through notions of professionalism – certain ways in which occupational groups might be distinguished.

This cultural construction approach is underdeveloped. Understandably no economists and few sociologists have elaborated on it. Its most fully developed aspects are feminist analyses of the gendered assumptions of the modern bureaucratic career. Thus the career has frequently been constructed as an inherently male preserve, both by direct and explicit criteria (where only male are deemed eligible for promotion) or more indirect and implicit criteria (where it is assumed that women are disqualified because of their responsibility for home and domestic affairs – see for instance Zimmeck, 1992). There are also some indications that this perspective might be used to examine the class based assumptions within career processes more fully than in the first two approaches. One interesting example – which we take up below – is to look at how notions of the ‘gentlemanly career’ were established in Britain. The strength of gentlemanly culture is now well attested (see especially Cain and Hopkins, 1993). A good example of the way this particular cultural frame might have impacted on the construction of career pathways is the reform of the Civil Service in the mid 1850s which epitomised a compromise between ethics of merit and breeding by distinguishing different ‘classes’ of entrant each to be recruited from different types of school (Gowan, 1987; Kelsall, 1955; Savage et al, 1992).

Within this perspective, then, the interesting issue is to see how class (as well as gendered, raced etc) symbols and images are codified in terms of the career, so that certain types of career mobility are seen as appropriate for specific social groups.
Rather than the career opening up lines of movement between groups and classes, it can be seen as defining particular sorts of socio-cultural belonging.

The social closure model. Finally, another perspective that draws upon Weber’s work explores how certain forms of social closure involve the drawing up of boundaries around career ladders. Social closure involves the regulation of access to prized positions so that those lacking certain ‘desirable’ traits are systematically prevented from entering these positions. It thus allows an occupation to be reproduced in socially exclusive ways. As with the third approach, perhaps the best-known example of this type concerns gendered processes of social closure, whereby career prospects are held out to men whilst women are confined to lower level jobs within organizational hierarchies. Such practices in Britain are well known through the use of the marriage bar, the use of female only grading systems and so forth (e.g. Zimmack, 1992; Crompton and Jones, 1984). Within this perspective, the issue becomes one of exploring how certain social groups are able to mobilise to construct the sorts of career ladders and values that allow them to reproduce themselves whilst excluding others. Professional career routes, which demand high-level vocation qualifications for entry to the initial job, are a good example of how the process of closure can operate (see for example Witz, 1992). Notions of social closure are a mainstay of sociological approaches to social mobility and also offer a way of thinking about how patterns of inter-generational (parent-child) mobility relates to career processes. This is an issue we are able to explore directly using data from our project.

The Case Study Organizations

We therefore have at least four ways of connecting the development of career ladders to social and economic processes. In the first two, links to social classes are indirect and contingent, whilst in the latter two one can see how processes of class formation may actually be tied up with the construction of specific career routes and practices. In order to evaluate which of these different theoretical perspectives holds most water, long-run sequential work-life history data is required. Our research involved case studies of three large-scale bureaucratic organizations. These were the Post Office, the Great Western Railways (GWR) and Lloyds Bank. These were atypical of the world of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century employment, which tended to be less organised. Nonetheless, they were far from insignificant. The Post Office, for example, was the biggest single employer in the country by 1914, with a quarter of a million employees (Daunton, 1984, p. xv), while Lloyds developed in this period from

4 Although by the end of the interwar period they had become rather more typical. By 1930, the 100 largest firms accounted for 26 percent of total manufacturing output in Britain, a figure similar to that in United States. Wardley (1999, p. 93) estimates that the 100 largest U.K. companies, each of which had over 5,000 employees, employed a total of 8.2 percent of those employed in the U.K. economy in 1907 rising to 11.3 percent in 1935 and 21 percent in 1955. During this period many large British corporations – Unilever, ICI, Boots and W.H. Smith among them – had achieved prominent positions in the British economy.
a small provincial operation based in Birmingham into one of the ‘big five’ clearing banks by the 1920s (Winton, 1982). The GWR is regarded as the most glamorous of the railway companies, in part because of its close association with the influential engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Soon after its foundation in 1833 it became the dominant railway company in the west of England, maintaining the key link between Bristol and London, but also spreading its lines as far north as the Mersey (Booker, 1977). However, whilst the three case studies were similar in being relatively large, multi-site operations, they also differed on a number of dimensions. One was public sector (the Post Office), another was a private sector corporation (the GWR), and another was originally a private family firm with significant family interests until the later nineteenth century (Lloyds). Two had significant manual workforces, the other was predominantly clerical. In short, if we can find some common patterns over the three sectors, this suggests that they are symptomatic of more general trends.

The GWR and the Post Office contained workforces spanning the manual/ non-manual divide (even Lloyds Bank had a small number of messengers, but these were always regarded as an entirely separate workforce to their white collar ones). This allows us to examine the amount of mobility across the entire occupational spectrum. Equally we are able to compare organizations which began to employ large numbers of women (Lloyds, the Post Office) from those which did not (the GWR) and we are able to compare developments in the public sector, in the private services sector, and in private manufacturing. In short, our choice of comparison is designed to produce diversity in our findings. If we can detect any common patterns amongst this diversity we might have good reason to suppose that we can discern general processes at work.

We begin with a study of the nature of career pathways inside each of the case-study organizations, and the reasons behind the development of formal career structures. We then move on to consider the implications of this for movements across class and status barriers. The picture painted by the data is, inevitably, complex but distinct patterns do emerge. It seems possible to distinguish three broad phases in the history of the modern career: foundation and growth from the 1850s and 60s through to 1900; a period of consolidation between 1900 and 1920; and a crisis phase spanning the interwar period. And while there were different emphases within the different organization at different times, overall the social and cultural closure models seem most the most useful when interpreting the data.

The Emergence of the Bureaucratic Career

The main impetus behind the development of bureaucratic organization in Britain was the nineteenth-century state, which provided a structural template based on the military and informed by notions of ‘gentlemanly’ status. Both the Post Office – itself a department of state – and the railway companies were particularly influenced by this model. Many of their early managers were ex-army officers and both organizations pointedly dressed their working-class employees in uniforms. The Post Office was especially important as a pioneer of the bureaucratic career both because of the large
numbers it employed and because of the fact that all reform of its procedures was subject to parliamentary debate and regular scrutiny by means of select committees and royal commissions.\footnote{Daunton writes that ‘The creation of new methods of labour management was in many ways more significant and impressive than the invention of the postage stamp’ (1984, p. 193).}

Early records, dating from the beginning of the nineteenth century in the case of the Post Office, suggest that job mobility for working-class employees was quite a common occurrence but that it was mostly unsystematic and only weakly integrated into a particular cultural frame. Our data shows, for example, that before the 1850s postmen had a 20 percent chance of promotion to white-collar positions, while as many as two-thirds of the sorters and counter-clerks could expect to move into higher positions. Clinton (1984) suggests that in any case, before the key decade of the 1850s, notable for the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms affecting civil service employment, there wasn’t a strict hierarchy between the manipulative grades, with letter carriers counting themselves as the service’s ‘aristocrats’.

Equally, it is well known that workers on the early GWR typically moved between jobs, and could expect to earn promotion to better paying positions. (Kingsford, 1970; Mckenna, 1980). Kingsford claims that there were ‘well defined if limited channels of advancement’ on the railways before 1870, but his tables appear to show considerably more variation in the nature of job mobility than he suggests. Porters, for example, could be promoted into fifteen other jobs, including ‘guard’ and ‘clerk’, there usually being no clear ladders connecting jobs together (Kingsford, 1970, pp. 135-8), and it seems that a significant number of railway clerks were recruited from manual positions. Footplate workers were from the beginning entirely separate from other grades,\footnote{On the GWR the Board of Directors supervised all appointments except those of footplate workers, the footplate workers being appointed by the locomotive superintendent (McDermott, 1927, Ch. XIV).} and their career paths were initially chaotic. It was claimed that the GWR’s first engine drivers were not recruited from within the industry, but from the ranks of the skilled fitters who had built the engines, and who were lured into staying to work the engine by the offer of high wages. It was only from the 1870s that the typical career route whereby boys were recruited as engine cleaners, who then became firemen and finally drivers, was established. As the demand for skilled drivers was exceptionally high, it also remained common for railway companies to poach drivers from other companies, so that many drivers continued to be recruited specifically as drivers (Bagwell, 1963, p. 19).

From the start, issues of industrial control were high on the management agenda in these two organizations, where a high proportion of the employees were manual workers. Yet in neither case during their early histories was labour discipline successfully wrapped up with career progression. Both the railway companies and the Post Office were confronted with particular disciplinary problems stemming from the nature of their business and also the period in which they began to develop. The early
nineteenth-century railways needed to establish their social and cultural legitimacy, which was endangered by the rural labouring source of many of their recruits, while the dispersal of the workforce threatened reliability and made supervision difficult. Accordingly, railway employees were considered ‘servants’, subject to a stringent rulebook and draconian fines for stepping out of line. Nevertheless, during this initial phase of railway development, the realities of the labour market, especially where the scarcity of drivers was concerned, blunted the edge of disciplinary policy. Thus, incremental wage scales, along with premiums, gratuities, long-service bonuses and a company-specific sickness benefit society were developed simply to encourage employees to stay with the company. (PRO RAIL 267/51; PRO RAIL 253/483; Kingsford, 1970, 104ff; Bagwell, 1961).

Of those in Victorian public service high standards of probity were demanded, and Post Office employees were subjected to close surveillance for any signs of dishonesty. Long prison sentences were routinely handed out to those convicted of letter stealing, and suspicion of the same was considered sufficient grounds for instant dismissal. But as Clinton suggests, in the first half of the nineteenth century discipline was more about regimentation and the inculcation of a corporate value system rather than a device associated with individual job progression (Clinton, 1984, pp. 45-6).

In general then the idea of the career as a kind of disciplinary system in which the meritorious were rewarded by promotion did not appear to exist in either the early Post Office or GWR. Although there were opportunities for upward job mobility in both organizations, it was not of a type that suggests fixed career ladders or which appeared to define job movement as a ‘moral’ project which workers should pursue. Job movement did not take place solely on fixed, established career, routes, nor did it appear to be strategically related to issues of discipline and authority. Punishment was geared to specific offences and not to long-term careers.

It is possible though to detect a clearer set of assumptions governing the construction of careers in the white-collar or middle-class sectors of the organizations we investigated. In Lloyds Bank job mobility revolved around the idea of a ‘gentlemanly’ contract, where promotion was related to the need for men to gain status as they aged. Single young men joined the bank as clerks, and were initially subsidised by their aspirant lower middle-class parents, who could in return expect their sons to accrue both social standing and income as they rose up the clerical ladder and eventually moved into management. A similar status-based system prevailed among the indoor administrative and managerial grades of Post Office employee based largely at St Martin’s Le Grand in London where before the 1850s entry was governed by patronage and progress by seniority.

\[7\] A good example of this was in 1867, when the GWR was on the verge of bankruptcy and was investigating all possible measures to reduce costs, but still was forced to concede wage demands to engine drivers who threatened to go on strike (Nock, 1962, p. 101).

\[8\] One contemporary, while working as a station clerk threatened to beat up his immediate superior, called him to his face by his nickname, and committed sundry other offences, yet still managed to obtain rapid promotion to Station Master’s ranks within three years (see Simmons, 1974).
Across all sectors, however, there is clear evidence that the last third of the nineteenth century was a critical period in which career mobility took on a more bureaucratic character. This is evident in a number of ways. Firstly, each organization established more formalised job ladders, with elaborate classification systems. On the railways, this took the form of a developing grading systems distinguishing three different classes of firemen’s and drivers work, each paying different wages. Drivers on long distance passenger routes were paid more than drivers on local passenger routes and so forth. Up to eleven different grades of footplate work were devised, creating a much more structured internal labour market. In Lloyds Bank, a system was devised in 1884 that divided the clerical workforce into four different categories, each with their own incremental salary. In the case of the Post Office, a highly ordered but complex hierarchy began to evolve from the 1850s, coinciding with the rapid expansion of the service. An organizational plan from the 1870s shows eleven departments broken down by 63 staff-types and 412 jobs and grades (Post 60/81). This process was also reflected in the annually published establishment books that detailed the individual career details of all office staff by department, grade and position on an incremental pay scale.

Secondly, the criteria needed to earn promotion were more clearly specified. This development was underpinned in the Post Office by a long-running debate on the respective benefits of selection for promotion by seniority and merit in the wake of the 1853 Northcote-Trevelyan reforms of the Civil Service (Post 30/164; Post 60/77). By the 1870s this had resulted in the production of detailed paper-work giving guidance as to how appointments and promotions were made to each job and grade of job by department, and related pro-forma for recommending and certificating promotion (Post 30/228). On the GWR, the idea of automatic progression was replaced by a new emphasis on credentialism. From the later 1860s ‘lad clerks’ had to serve a probationary period and at the end of it pass examinations in order to achieve permanent status. Similarly from the 1880s progress through the various classes of firemen’s and engine driver’s work became increasingly dependent on formal testing of skills by inspectors based at the company’s Swindon HQ.

As the GWR took control of and started to define the structure of career, it also became possible to integrate progress with discipline at the individual level. As George Armstrong reported in 1885 ‘when a man is put back through misconduct he forfeits to a greater or lesser extent his position on the seniority list’ (Rail 253/483). Similarly, from the 1870s, the Post Office introduced devices such as good conduct stripes and merit awards, each with a monetary value attached, which were granted to members of the manipulative grades for ‘conspicuous good behaviour’ or a long period in the service without indiscipline (Post 60/73). Individual records of employment show many instances of such awards being withheld or withdrawn for various offences, and after the 1892 postmen’s strike there was a wholesale removal of stripes. In the long run, however, the Post Office failed to make this approach stick and good conduct stripes were eventually absorbed into the standard incremental wage system.
Thirdly, there is evidence that it was only after mid-century that the elaboration of the ‘ideology’ of the career began to take place. Our scrutiny of company documents, trade union journals, and autobiographies show how the Smilesian idea of self help was increasingly attached to the notion of climbing an organizational career ladder. In the wake of the Northcote-Trevelyan the 1854 Elcho report on the Post Office concluded that:

In order to obtain men of the proper degree of education and trustworthiness at low wages, it is necessary to hold out prospects of advancement to those who conduct themselves well, and who manifest the qualifications that are required for superior posts.

While the principles upon which advancement should be granted were to remain a live issue for the next forty years, there was no doubting the importance attached to the idea of ‘rising in the service’. Access to promotion was a subject that featured prominently in the series of pre-First World War inquiries into conditions of employment in the Post Office. In the 1880s it was claimed that in most parts of the service officers ‘may carry a field marshal’s baton in his knapsack, and be fit ultimately to be Controller of his own office’, and in 1927 the Secretary to the Post Office, Sir Evelyn Murray declared that ‘The ladder of opportunity is necessarily a narrow one, but it is there for those who are able to climb it’ (Murray, 1927, pp. 190-1). One former employee who started out as a boy messenger at the start of the twentieth century recalled that ‘there was always this opening through the Civil Service Commission to be a sorter. That’s what most people were after’ (Vincent, 1993, p. 231), while an editorial in the Mount Review from 1941 observed somewhat disparagingly that in many offices ‘there is a school of thought... which looks upon promotion, in the narrow sense of the word, as the be-all and end-all of human endeavour’ (Purkiss, 1957, p. 20).

Similarly, on the GWR, it became common to hold out the idea of the career to promising young staff. In 1908 a Director and future Chairman of the company Viscount Churchill, informed his staff that:

however subordinate your present position may be, if you will only take the trouble to make yourselves efficient you will, I am sure, rise to positions of trust in this great company (Great Western Railway Magazine, January 1908).

The same year his words were taken up by the staff journal of the GWR who informed its readers that:

railway employees have never had such splendid opportunities to improve their position as they have at the present time, and if a man does not attain a reasonable measure of success he can only blame himself (Great Western Railway Magazine, August 1908).
The latter years of the nineteenth century were important in seeing the formal establishment of career ladders across the different organizations we studied. On the face of it, these career ladders seem to have cut across class boundaries as much as to reinforce them, and in many respects their development suggests compatibility with human capital notions of bureaucratic expansion. However, the actual patterns of work-life mobility revealed by our data suggest a more complex pattern.

Four types of evidence are important here. First, as Table 4.1 indicates, career ladders were generally constructed to allow mobility within rather than between social classes. For example, the vast majority of postmen achieved no inter-class mobility during their careers, and half of those who did became sorters, telegraphers and counter clerks which were jobs positioned in the lower reaches of the white-collar sector.

Table 4.1 Career mobility\(^9\) of particular categories of employee in the three case-study organizations (percentages rounded by row)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Job [N]</th>
<th>Postman</th>
<th>Sorter</th>
<th>Clerk</th>
<th>Higher Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Post Office</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postman [661]</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorter [226]</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Clerk [55]</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Western Railway: Blue Collar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engine Cleaner [125]</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Western Railway: White Collar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Lad’ Clerk [281]</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyds Bank</td>
<td>Manual Bank Clerk</td>
<td>Intermediate Bank Manager</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank Clerk [1672]</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Treasury Letters,\(^{10}\) Post Office Archives; GWR Employment Books, PRO; Lloyds Bank ‘Bible’ and yearly directories, Lloyds Bank Archive.\(^{11}\)

\(^9\) Figures here and below are for those staying within the organization long enough to pick up a pension (see note 10 below). Turnover rates before this stage was reached are difficult to establish. Rates of dismissal were low, amounting, for example, to just 1.5 percent in the Post Office during the 1870s.
There were no ex-postmen at all in the corridors of power in St Martin’s le Grand or at Mount Pleasant. Those who began their post office careers in middle class jobs, on the other hand, had reasonable prospects. Two-fifths of sorters and countermen became clerks, and 20 percent of clerks became postmasters or higher officers.

A similar picture emerges from Lloyds Bank. While the small number of messengers and other manual workers who worked for Lloyds had no career prospects at all, the proportion of clerks earning promotion to management was as high as 40 percent for those who joined the bank in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Stovel et al, 1996).

The GWR is more complex because the variety of occupational categories makes it difficult to come to general conclusions. The most likely route for working class lads to move into the middle classes was amongst uniformed workers, where around 12 percent of porters and guards ended up as Station Masters, Foremen or other supervisory workers. Footplate workers, by contrast, had little prospect of moving beyond the footplate. Only around 3 percent became foremen and, although the GWR emphasised that it was possible for railway clerks to rise to become Chief General Manager, only around 1 percent of clerks reached officer status.

Table 4.2 Social origins (by class of father) of particular categories of employee in the three case-study organizations (percentages rounded by row)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job Category</th>
<th>Social Class Origin</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upper Middle</td>
<td>Lower Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmen</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorters</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Office Clerks</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Footplate Workers</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank Clerks</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: marriage registers.¹²

¹⁰ These were documents submitted to establish pension entitlements in accordance with the Superannuation Acts of 1834 to 1892. They detail years of service by grade and wage/salary. Pensions were paid to those who had completed at least ten years’ service.
¹¹ The ‘Bible’ is an alphabetic listing of employees compiled in the 1940s to assess Bank employees’ claims to pension rights. It records the final job and branch of each worker, thereby making it possible to reconstruct their careers by working backwards with Lloyds yearly directories.
¹² None of the career records taken from the case study organizations included information about family background. Marriage records were used to generate a proxy for this variable, albeit an indirect and approximate one. Since 1837, marriage certificates have carried occupational information about the partners and their parents. By randomly sampling
Note: Social Classes based on the Registrar General’s Social Classification Scheme (1951), as adapted by Miles (1999).

The second point is that this pattern of within-class mobility was reinforced by the pattern of class recruitment to different grades. While not watertight, entry points were subject to a marked degree of social filtering (Table 4.2).

Entry to the clerical ranks in all organizations was clearly geared more towards middle-class children, while recruitment to manual and manipulative employment was dominated by those who had grown up in working-class families. This situation was underpinned by different attitudes towards promotion in different grades. In Lloyds and the GWR the Boards of Directors retained the power to make decisions about the promotion of clerical workers, whilst salaried managers were given autonomy to deal with manual workers. This demarcation, which sanctioned the superior status of clerical workers through their personal contacts with the organizations proprietors, proved an important vehicle for constructing and maintaining the ‘collar’ division. In the Post Office, up until the 1890s, all grades - including postmen - continued to honour the idea of the gentlemanly contract which had been associated with the earlier era of nomination and patronage, and which was encouraged by the retention of seniority in the promotion process. But in reality the outdoor staff became increasingly detached from the rest of the established workforce from the 1850s onwards, as the authorities sanctioned a re-grading exercise that saw the emergence of fiercely defensive intermediate groups at the top of the ‘inferior’ establishment (Clinton, 1984, pp. 50-2). Meanwhile the essential status division between the manipulative grades and the clerks and administrators of the ‘superior’ establishment was symbolised by the exclusion of individuals belonging to the former from the department’s annually published ‘establishment books’.

Further evidence that the career was used primarily to reinforce traditional status divisions rather than enhance economic efficiency through the development of new systems of reward and motivation along human capital lines comes from the way in which job ladders were often constructed downwards - that is to say by re-grading within scales or by the creation of new grades beneath existing jobs. This can be seen in the creation of the boy clerk grade on the railways, in the fragmentation of postmen’s grades and the lengthening of postal pay scales in the later nineteenth-century, and in the introduction of women workers by both the Post Office and Lloyds.

...
Bank. The Post Office also maintained a large, supplementary, ‘unestablished’ workforce that it used to provide a flexible supply of labour and to maintain pressure on established workers. In this sense the elaboration of career ladders was linked to a labour intensive strategy of reducing wage costs rather than upskilling or training-related issues.

A similar story emerges with respect to credentials, which tended to be used to regulate the closure of particular career routes. Indeed the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms made the relationship between recruitment, employment status and education qualifications highly explicit. Traditional patronage-based methods of selection and recruitment also remained important - especially in banking. But even in the Post Office, which was formally committed to merit by 1913, complaints about favouritism and the continuation of indirect patronage ensured that a mixture of seniority and merit tended to prevail (Clinton, 1984, p. 58).

Figure 4.1 Promotion rates to managerial positions among bank clerks who joined Lloyds between 1890-1934

Source: Lloyds Bank Bible and yearly directories, Lloyds Bank Archives.

The final type of evidence in support of a model that suggests that the development of the modern career was associated with a process of social and cultural closure comes from the changing patterns of career mobility over the period 1840-1940. Contrary to the rosy image painted in the GWR staff journal quoted earlier, the prospects of career mobility in all three organizations actually appear to have worsened as they began to consolidate at the beginning of the twentieth century. A

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14 Unestablished staff were employees – both full- and part-time – without the security of regular employment. They were not entitled to a pension or any other benefit enjoyed by established staff. The majority of female post office employees were unestablished.
number of writers (e.g. Anderson, 1976 and Price, 1971) have previously suggested that promotion prospects were declining in white-collar work from the end of the nineteenth century. As all the organizations matured in size and stopped opening new stations, post offices or branches, so the total demand for new labour dropped. The GWR completed its lines by the 1890s, Lloyds mainly expanded after 1880 through merger with existing banks, and the growth of the Post Office slowed after the 1890s. This therefore meant that in all three sectors there were increasing blockages to career progress, at the very same time that the organizations were holding out the prospects of careers to their ‘brightest’ and ‘best’. Our data for the first time gives concrete evidence of this trend. In Lloyds Bank (see Figure 4.1) the proportion of clerks becoming managers by the end of their careers fell steadily from a high of 38 percent of those who entered between 1895-1899 to 20 percent of those who entered between 1915-1919.

A similar pattern is found among the sorting, counter-clerk and telegraphy grades in the Post Office (Figure 4.2) where, between the early nineteenth-century and the mid-Victorian period, the promotion chances of male employees declined from 41 percent to 23 percent.

![Figure 4.2 Promotion rates and destinations among male sorters joining the Post Office between 1800 and 1900](image)

*Source: Treasury Letters, Post Office Archive.*

The crisis in career prospects was not confined to middle-class employees of bureaucracies, however. The same kind of pattern is also evident among postmen. Having increased for those joining the service up to 1890, postmen’s promotion rates fell away dramatically thereafter (Figure 4.3). This decline is actually more
fundamental than it appears at first sight, as in detail it can be seen that a rise in supervisory opportunities actually masks a continuous decline in the numbers achieving more substantial middle-class mobility from the 1850s onwards.

It is also apparent that the time taken for a postman to achieve promotion increased (Figure 4.4). On average it took 20 years. But before 1870 it was as low as 9 years, rising to 33 years by the 1890s. This phenomenon of a lengthening career queue was also experienced on the railways. Table 4.3 shows that footplate workers who began working for the GWR between 1845-1854 only waited for an average of 4 years before becoming drivers. However, the delay increased over time, to 11 years for those entering between 1855-1864, and to 16 years for those entering between 1870-74, a figure which remained roughly stable until the cohort entering between 1910-1919 who could expect to be held up for somewhere in the region of 20 years.

Over the same period uniformed workers also experienced a near doubling of the time it took to become a foreman or a stationmaster.

![Figure 4.3 Promotion rates and destinations among postmen joining the Post Office between 1800 and 1910](image)

*Source: Treasury Letters, Post Office Archive*

But the really interesting feature of these trends from the perspective of the social closure thesis is that they indicate the widespread ‘career crisis’ which developed in all organizations from the later nineteenth-century onwards was finally resolved in the interests of middle-class men. This is particularly evident in Lloyds Bank, where the situation began to recover after 1915, and by end of 1920s entrants could look
forward to the same high promotion prospects as their predecessors. The promotion blockage at Lloyds had been caused by the completion of branch structure in the early twentieth century. Frustrated ambitions led to industrial unrest among bank clerks, and, just as important, rising pressure from middle-class parents concerned about the bank’s failure to meet the trade-off implied in the gentlemanly employment contract. The problem was solved when the bank took the crucial decision to employ non-career women to carry out routine clerical and bookkeeping duties, hence freeing up male clerks to pursue managerial careers once more.

However, in the Post Office, too, the position of the lower white-collar workforce began to improve, and by the 1890s new entrants’ prospects were as good as they had ever been. There was, though, no similar recovery in postmen’s mobility rates. Moreover, the chances of moving to the top of their grade and gaining a place among the inspectorate also fell away markedly in the first decade of the twentieth century. These trends bear out the both the consistent complaints of postmen to the pre-1914 parliamentary inquiries about access to promotion and the sorters ability to close ranks and keep the postal grades at arms length. As one postman giving evidence to the 1895-7 Tweedmouth Committee succinctly put it ‘section after section begin, create privileges and draw up a ladder that others may not enter’ (Clinton, 1984, p. 50).

As at Lloyds, the employment of women appears to have played a key role in the restructuring of promotion opportunities in the Post Office. The contrasting trends in the career trajectories of postmen and the sorting, counter clerk and telegrapher grades coincided with the rapid increase in female white-collar employment in the Post
Then after the First World War, when the previously separate male and female civil-service grading systems were amalgamated, women writing clerks were down-graded while their male counterparts were given executive status (Zimmeck, 1992). Thus, women’s increasing occupation of the intermediate, routine clerical sector of the postal workforce, where their rewards and prospects were significantly inferior to those of men, seems at one and the same time to have reinforced the class divide, helping to close down the internal mobility prospects of working-class postmen, while protecting and enabling those of middle-class men.

Conclusions

Our research suggests that a clear periodisation of the emergence of the modern career can be traced through three organizations, with certain commonalities between them. In the period until the later nineteenth century, job mobility was considerable, but was also chaotic and lacked structure. The career did not exist as a ‘moral project’, and our three organizations had not welded the idea of career progress to any kind of disciplinary apparatus. From the 1860s (GWR, Post Office) and 1880s (Lloyds), we can see the emergence of the career model. This process involved the establishment of new formalised grading and promotion systems underpinned by a new career culture. It was related to important innovations in management thinking. However, shortly after the emergence of this new model, a major contradiction appeared. As the organizations stopped expanding, so promotion chances slowed. Career prospects were plunged into crisis during the early years of the twentieth century leading to the accentuation of social conflict as junior workers became restive at the lack of potential progress open to them. In the period after the First World War organizations found strategies for dealing with these conflicts. In Lloyds and the Post Office a gender strategy was deployed, involving social closure between men, who had career prospects, and women, who did not. On the GWR, and to some extent in the Post Office, a process of class-based closure took place, where manual men found their prospects reduced.

The different ways in which the careers crisis was resolved had far reaching implications for understanding twentieth century social relations. In effect, having opened up the possibility of occupational movement in the later nineteenth century, new devices for reasserting stability were constructed. These involved redeploying ascriptive devices of gender and parental class as means of re-inscribing fixity. In this

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15 The influx of women telegraphers was inadvertent. However, the Civil Service, and the Post Office within it, reflected – and in some respects pioneered – the expansion of women’s white-collar employment in the last third of the nineteenth century. Leaving the female telegraphers aside, the number of woman clerks in the Post Office expanded from 45 at the initial intake in 1871 to 2700 by 1914 (Zimmeck, 1992). The First World War then gave a further boost to women’s white-collar employment, the number of female clerks across the economy rising from 179,000 in 1911 to 648,000 by 1931 (Routh, 1980).
way, the occupation became defined as the crucial identifying point for most workers, other than the ‘special’ case of qualified, middle class men.

We can see then, that aspects of all four of the career ‘models’ outlined in section 2 were evident at various times in the development of career structures in the four case-study organizations. However, our evidence suggests that the construction of the modern bureaucratic career in Britain was principally associated with a process of social closure, fuelled by considerations of cost cutting rather than the efficient deployment of human capital. Embedded within this process, and institutionalized by it, were traditional cultural assumptions about status and gender roles. Rather than cutting across and fragmenting class lines, the patterns of recruitment to and mobility within organizations tended to reinforce or renew existing social divisions. In particular, the partial resolution of the post-war crisis in career prospects would seem to be strongly implicated in the formation of the twentieth-century middle class.

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