

Bibliographic Details

Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology

Edited by: George Ritzer

eISBN: 9781405124331

Print publication date: 2007



Class

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Class refers to a stratification system that divides a society into a hierarchy of social positions. It is also a particular social position within a class stratification system: lower class, working class, middle class, upper class, or other such class designations. It is a method of social ranking that involves money, power, culture, taste, identity, access, and exclusion. Conceptualizations of class belong not only to sociology, but also to the popular press, the marketplace, the political process, and to those who perceive themselves as being located within a particular class position. People who do perceive class distinctions are “class conscious” and may feel the impact of class in powerful ways. Others barely notice it or refuse to concede its existence despite living with its effects. To some people, class connotes differing economic circumstances, lifestyles, and tastes; to others it is about social status, esteem, and respect.

New students of sociology will quickly encounter the concept of class. They will become familiar with the writings of Marx and Weber and other prominent social theorists who have contrasted, debated, explained, and elaborated the works of these foundational figures over the past century. They will be introduced to the research methods and applications that have alternatively advanced and constrained class studies, especially in the US. They will also find that the topic of class is both ideologically and emotionally charged, and that its usage in academic as well as interpersonal settings can be fraught with controversy and strong sentiment.

During and after the years of the “Red scare” following World War I and the era of McCarthyism in the 1950s, fear of communism and anything “Marxian” contributed greatly to individual and academic tension over the topics of class and class conflict in the US. American anxiety stemming from these periods served to strengthen the widespread creed that America is a “classless society,” a land of opportunity for everyone who is willing to work hard and strive for economic and material achievement through personal effort. With emphasis on enterprise and the freedom to succeed, the stage was set early on for an American-style social stratification system that differed from those that had evolved over time in the Old World. Henry Chistman, a missionary touring the colonies in the nineteenth century, wrote: “American[s] can

never flourish on leased lands. They have too much enterprise to work for others or remain tenants.”

Divergent class perspectives in the literature capture differences in the historical development of class systems in Europe and the US. Egalitarianism, in its American meaning, pertains to equality of opportunity and respect, not of result or condition, and reflects the absence of inherited feudal structures, monarchies, and aristocracies. It indicates an achievement-oriented system and a history of political democracy prior to industrialization that remains unreceptive to European-style class consciousness. While European social theory was concerned with the role of economic classes (and class conflict) in industrial society, most American sociologists concentrated instead on studies of social mobility, analyses of the occupational structure, and subjective perceptions about occupational prestige. To soften the Marxist model of class, social class was transformed into a continuous gradation of social class positions based on prestige rankings through which individuals could evolve as a consequence of personal effort. The new class model, adapted from Weber's “status” theories, was extended and elaborated by sociologists seeking to understand the “American form” of social stratification.

Formal definitions of objective social class and subjective social class appear in the sociological literature. *Objective* social class is defined by Hoult (1974) as “social class in terms of objective criteria decided upon by the sociologist, for example, income, occupation, and education. The criteria chosen by the sociologist are usually based on observations and studies of how the people in the community view the system of stratification.” Hoult defines *subjective* social class as follows: “Social class in terms of how people place themselves within the society. People may be asked what social classes exist in their community and then asked to place themselves within one of these classes, or they may be asked to rate themselves within a system of classes presented by the investigator.”

In both European and American settings today, class is used in a wide range of descriptive and explanatory contexts. Depending upon context, various concepts of class are employed as well. Together with other authors in *Approaches to Class Analysis*, Wright (2005) portrays class concepts through a variety of theoretical prisms for the purpose of clarifying alternative traditions. Definitions, concepts, and elaborations of class, however, are fundamentally shaped by the questions they seek to answer.

A primary task has been to seek answers about (or to try to prevent) the social cleavages and conflicts that can impact and change the course of history. Others use class to locate and explore the objective or subjective identity and lived experiences of individuals and families in contemporary society. Questions within these research traditions may be related, such as when class location is used to reveal and explain the culture, interests, or antagonisms of different classes. Sociologists also use class distinctions to measure social mobility from one generation to another and within and between societies, or to explain variances on any number of lifestyle, preference, voting, and other social and economic measures.

All class research approaches, whether designed to probe for conflicting class interests, to measure social mobility, or to test for variances, are descended from overarching theoretical class frameworks. They are rooted in the writings of Marx, followed by refinements and rebuttals in the works of Weber and numerous other social thinkers across many disciplines. Although many use the term social class after Plato, concepts of class (and social class) received little attention until Marx made it central to his theory of social conflict and to the role that classes play in social movements and social change.

For Marx, class division and conflict between classes exist in all societies. Industrial society consists mainly of two conflicting classes: the bourgeoisie, owners of the means of production (the resources – land, factories, capital, and equipment – needed for the production and distribution of material goods); and the proletariat, who work for the owners of productive property. The owning class controls key economic, political, and ideological institutions, placing it inevitably in opposition to non-owners as it seeks to protect its power and economic interests. “Class struggle” is the contest between opposing classes and it is through the dynamic forces that result from class awareness of conflicting interests that societal change is generated.

Marx himself seems never to have attempted to state in any precise and definitive way just what he meant by class, although four classes that are characteristic of a capitalist society have emerged from Marxist literature: (1) the capitalist class (the bourgeoisie); (2) a class of professionals, merchants, and independent craftsmen (the petty bourgeois); (3) the working class (the proletariat); and (4) a class whose members for a variety of reasons cannot work (the lumpenproletariat). In well-developed capitalist economies the working class constitutes the majority of the population. The capitalist class owns most of society's assets and holds most of the economic and political power. In between capitalists and workers is a class that consists of professionals, merchants, shopkeepers, craftsmen, and other independent proprietors. Like capitalists, they own their own means of production and hire workers to assist them. They

often contribute much of the labor required for creating or selling their goods and/or services and therefore can be their own “workers.” Sometimes members of this class identify their interests with capitalists, while on other occasions their interests are in line with those of the working class.

Marx believed that all productive (capitalist) systems must eventually give way to more advanced social systems wherein workers will control the means of production and in which there will be no classes. His analysis was concerned primarily with the structure and dynamics of capitalist industrial societies against which he predicted workers would eventually revolt. Revolution did occur in Eastern Europe (although the resulting communist system ultimately failed), but a workers’ revolution did not materialize in the West. Marx did not foresee that as industrial capitalism thrived in the West, the fundamental objective of workers became a larger share of the economic pie, not a change in the system itself. Further problems with Marxian theory occurred in the changing class structure itself. While Marx called for a growing contraposition of the two major opposing classes, the polarization of owners and workers did not occur. Instead, the middle class grew and both the working and middle classes accommodated to, even embraced, the capitalist system. Although not accurate in some predictions, the Marxian view of society is nevertheless valuable to understanding class, class antagonisms, conflicting interests, and social stratification in human societies.

Weber’s concepts and contributions to stratification theory expanded and refined Marxian understandings of advanced industrial society. Like Marx, Weber believed that economic stratification produces social classes: “We may speak of a class when (1) a number of people have in common a specific causal component of their life chances, insofar as (2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income, and (3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets.” But Weber suggested that classes could form in any market situation, and he argued that other forms of social stratification could occur independently of economics. Weber’s was a three-dimensional model of stratification consisting of (1) *social classes* that are objectively formed social groupings having an economic base; (2) *parties* which are associations that arise through actions oriented toward the acquisition of social power; and (3) *status* groups delineated in terms of social estimations of honor or esteem.

For Weber, classes are aggregates of individuals who share similar “life chances” in their education and work and in their ability to purchase material goods and services. Life chances experienced within social classes are based upon the degree of *control* exercised over particular markets: money and credit, property, manufacturing, and various learned skills that earn income in the workforce. Dominant classes achieve a tight monopoly on some lucrative market; less dominant classes get only partial market participation (Collins 1985).

In Weberian terms a class is more than a population segment that shares a particular economic position relative to the means of production. Classes reflect “communities of interest” and social prestige as well as economic position. Class members share lifestyles, preferences, and outlooks as a consequence of socialization, educational credentials, and the prestige of occupational and other power positions they hold, which also serve to cloak the economic class interests that lie beneath. This status ideology eases the way for class members to monopolize and maintain the prestige, power, and financial gain of higher socioeconomic positions, as only persons who seem like “the right kind” are allowed into preferred positions (Collins 1985).

The social class structures of several American communities (and cities) were identified in classic studies from the late 1930s through the late 1960s. In 1941 W. Lloyd Warner and his associates, on the basis of his research in a New England community, conceptualized classes as groups of people, judged as superior or inferior in prestige and acceptability to the classes below or above them. Coleman and Neugarten, for their 1950s study of social class in Kansas City, built on this research, but converted class to status groupings in order to test the symbols of social status such as neighborhood, social clubs, homes, churches, educational attainment, and occupations. Weber’s dimensions of class were disaggregated into “socioeconomic variables” that included income, education, and occupation. Attention was shifted away from purely economic interests to include subjective differences among individuals and families in neighborhoods and communities. The results of these studies were in line with Weber’s conception of status groups delineated in terms of social estimations of subjective status. They also showed a highly developed awareness of social ranking based upon status symbols – homes, neighborhoods, social clubs – and the relative social status of the individuals and families who owned or otherwise enjoyed them.

Community studies “demonstrated” that a continuum exists among occupations ranked primarily by prestige. The top and bottom status groups were seen as small in size and were defined in extreme terms as the richest and the poorest people. This description left the rest as one large middle class, a perception similar to class images that persist in the US today. Is the US a “classless society?” In such a society, social classes are ill-defined, blurred, and overlapping. There is little or no consciousness of class divisions and there are no subcultures based on social class. Some policymakers,

journalists, and others use concepts or dimensions of status, alone or in some combination, to describe the categories of a basically classless system. The resulting social separations that consign most Americans to the “middle” are frequently either blurred or arbitrarily drawn. [Vanneman and Cannon \(1987\)](#) describe this all-too-common practice: “Class sorts out positions in society along a many-rungged ladder of economic success and social prestige; in this continuous image, classes are merely relative rankings along the ladder: upper class, lower class, upper-middle class, ‘the Toyota set,’ ‘the BMW set,’ ‘Brahmins,’ and the dregs ‘from the other side of the tracks.’”

By contrast, a true class society is characterized by population segments having distinctive attitudes, values, and other cultural qualities and forming subcultures within the larger societal culture as a whole. The perception that one belongs to a given social class – whether higher or lower in relative ranking – involve familiarity with certain manners and customs, similar lifestyles, access to (or exclusion from) sources of privilege, knowledge, income, wealth, and feelings of community with other members of the same class. Personal interests may or may not depend upon the position and attainments of the social class as a whole, since relations between and among social classes are complicated by race, gender, age, and ethnicity, and changing workplace and regulatory issues as well.

A theoretical case in point concerns the emergence of a much more complex work environment in the twenty-first century, simultaneously calling for broad (and deeper) sociological understanding of the impact of global enterprise on human collectivities at home and abroad, and a rethinking of the effects of financial interests that are more diffusely held, more complex, and more competitively focused than in the past. To address the new workplace complexity, [Wright \(2005\)](#) recognizes (1) that class analyses of actual societies today require identifying ways in which different class relations may be combined, and (2) that simple, one-dimensional property rights are no longer valid, but instead are actually complex bundles of rights and powers subject to government restrictions, union representation on boards of directors, employee stock ownership, and delegations of power to managers, and other rights and powers that are being “decomposed and redistributed.” Such redistribution of rights and powers moves class relations away from simple, abstract forms of polarized relations.

Recent studies, the popular press, and public discourse argue that the US is not a classless society and that class is a powerful force in American life. Class differences and the obvious movement of families up and down the economic ladder present a contradictory but compelling picture of stagnating mobility, emerging elites, and the lived experience of social class cultures, particularly those involving the intersections of race and gender. Despite controversy and disagreement among some social scientists that the era of class is over, it appears that interest in the concept of class, far from being over, is actually on the rise.

Ironically, the operation of class in the US is becoming more apparent as globalization serves to illuminate increasingly unequal distribution of income, wealth, and personal power at home. Responsibility for job and income security, health insurance and health care, education, and retirement security has been shifting steadily for some time from government and business interests to working Americans. Over the last two decades the income gap between wealthy Americans (who own investments and enjoy federal tax breaks) and those at the middle and bottom of the pay scale has widened. Wages are stagnant, the middle class is shouldering a larger tax burden, and prices for health care, housing, tuition, gasoline, and food have soared.

In US popular culture and political conversation, class is often referred to as the “haves and have-nots.” What is really meant is “rich” and “poor,” but class is about more than money. The emotional and practical difficulties of transcending class boundaries have been well documented by sociologists and others in both classic and recent literature. America still celebrates the idea that there is opportunity to move up from humble beginnings to achieve greatness, and for some fortunate Americans this scenario may still be true. For those who follow social policy trends, however, there are ominous signs that all but a privileged few may be losing hard-won economic gains and that a permanent underclass may be hardening.

At a time when retirement income is on the horizon for pre-retirees, employers are trimming or cutting entirely previously promised pension and health care benefits. At a time when a college degree matters more than ever, success in obtaining an education is being linked to class position and to the finances required to make up for previous public support of higher education. At a time of extraordinary advances in medicine, class differences in health and lifespan are wide and appear to be widening ([Scott & Leonhardt 2005](#)). There is far less actual upward mobility than once believed and far more downward sliding than is being acknowledged. Most problematic of all may be the prospective loss of the pervasive ideology that social class boundaries in America merely exist to be overcome. The stage seems set for renewed serious interest by sociologists in the realities of social class in America today.

SEE ALSO: [Class Conflict](#); [Class Consciousness](#); [Class, Status, and Power](#); [Marx, Karl](#); [Stratification and Inequality](#),

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Cite this article

Vitt, Lois A. "Class." *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Ritzer, George (Ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2007. Blackwell Reference Online. 12 January 2009 <http://www.blackwellreference.com.gate.lib.buffalo.edu/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405124331_chunk_g97814051243319_ss1-49>

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