

US Classes

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of U.S. classes, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Karl Marx and Theorizations of Class
2. Neo-Marxism and Theorizations of Class
3. Max Weber and Theorizations of Class
4. Pierre Bourdieu and Theorizations of Class
5. Class Defined in American Society
6. The Creative Class

1. KARL MARX AND THEORIZATIONS OF CLASS

Sociologist E.P. Thompson, who wrote a book called *The Making of the English Working Class*, argued that, "I do not see class as a structure, or even a category, but as something which in fact happens, and can be shown to have happened, in human relationships. Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences, articulate their interest as opposed to the interests of others." What E.P. Thompson's quote implies is that the class system is not fixed--it's flexible, it changes.

There are several famous theorizations of class. Karl Marx viewed class as starkly divided by ownership of property or non-ownership of property, and the relationship to the means of capitalist production. Therefore, class positions the bourgeoisie, or the capitalist--those who owned the factories and the means of production--versus the proletariat, or the laborers--those who only own their labor.



THINK ABOUT IT

In Marx's theory, where's the middle class? The middle class is only weakly theorized in Marx's system as the petty bourgeois. They don't really have a place in Marx's scheme--they're people who have pretenses to the bourgeoisie but aren't quite there yet, and yet they're also not quite proletariat. Marx doesn't spend a lot of analytical time on them, and the existence of a bona fide middle class, which you see develop in mature capitalism, is a flaw in Marx's theorization.

2. NEO-MARXISM AND THEORIZATIONS OF CLASS

There wasn't a revolution, like Marx predicted; instead, there was a blossoming middle class. How did this happen? Neo-Marxists have spent a lot of theoretical time trying to understand why there exists a middle class, and how the middle class can fit into some Marxist typology of class structure. They often do this by focusing on the idea of a class in itself versus a class for itself.

Class in itself is just a class that objectively exists, for example, all machine operators or mechanics. Marxists would maintain that all mechanics are objectively in the same class structure. However, this is different than the notion of class for itself, which is a class in which all of those mechanics would recognize that they're connected. They would recognize that their interests are the same, like E.P. Thompson said, therefore they become recognized subjectively as united in a class with the common interests.

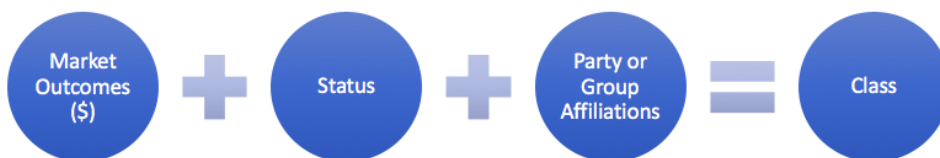


BIG IDEA

Neo-Marxists have shown, particularly sociologist Erik Olin Wright, that the class system has complexified such that there are many different positions in the class structure that articulate different interests. There are many different interests in society that might not necessarily align in the same way that Marx viewed the bourgeoisie and proletariat.

3. MAX WEBER AND THEORIZATION OF CLASS

Max Weber's theorization of class was particularly helpful in explaining this. Weber introduced the idea of status and party as affecting your class position. For Weber, market outcomes--the income you get entering the market--is one component, plus status, plus party affiliations or group affiliation, all intersect to determine one's social standing or class position.



You can see that through the intersection of these three elements, there are many different class positions and interests. Class interests flow from class position, and with many class positions and their corresponding interests, class groups are going to be smaller. These groups aren't going to necessarily see themselves as united across class positions as easily, because of the complexity of the middle class.

4. PIERRE BOURDIEU AND THEORIZATION OF CLASS

Sociologist, anthropologist, and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu provides another way to look at class. Bourdieu argued that class position is determined by the amounts of social, economic, and cultural capital that people possess. These are three unique forms of capital that one can have, Bourdieu theorized.

1. Social capital is your group membership, what groups you belong to
2. Economic capital is your money, or money value

3. Cultural capital is the knowledge, skills, and abilities that you possess

➤ **EXAMPLE** You can be rich in one type of capital and poor in another type. A professor may have a lot of cultural capital--advance education and training--but not a lot of economic capital. Thus professors have a specific class interest--they want to make their cultural capital dominant in society, Bourdieu theorized. Likewise, a business person might have a lot of economic capital, but not a lot of esoteric, cultural capital. In turn, they want to monopolize the value of their capital in society, economic capital.

Bourdieu theorized then that people are always trying to assert the capital that they possess as the dominant form in society. Each of these forms of capital also has its own aesthetic taste in consumption preferences associated with it, which people display when they consume. Consumption, buying stuff, is thus one way they display their capital and their class position in society.



BIG IDEA

Bourdieu's argument is that a multitude of consumer interest based on differing social positions necessitates a class faction. Each faction is defined by their differential amounts of capital, and has its own artists, philosophers, newspapers, and critics, just as it has, for example, its own hairdressers, interior decorators, or tailors. This varies by class, and is a key insight from Bourdieu. This insight flips the notion of class on its head, and puts it into the realm of consumption, taste and preferences. Bourdieu went on to argue that people use their consumption to assert their distinction in society and position themselves socially relative to others, which is the essence of class.

5. CLASS DEFINED IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Sociologists can approach class in many different ways, and arguably, sometimes they can't define class at all. There's absolutely no consensus on how to do define class sociologically, but one way is by utilizing yearly income values:

Class	Yearly Income
Upper Class	More than \$200,000
Middle Class	\$30,000 - \$200,000
Lower Class	Less than \$30,000

By this definition, an **upper class** person makes more than \$200,000 a year. **Middle class** makes between \$30,000 and \$200,000 a year, and **lower class** makes less than \$30,000 a year.

The **working class** are members from both the lower class and middle class who make between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year. They usually have little to no savings or investments. Most Americans are working class.

There is also the **working poor** -- people who work hard, but cannot seem to get ahead. They live paycheck to paycheck and struggle to make ends meet.

➤ **EXAMPLE** A woman who takes the bus an hour to get to work, to work a low wage job, and then also works a night job, simply to make ends meet and feed her child, is an example of someone who is in the working poor.

**Upper Class**

Members make more than \$200,000 a year.

Middle Class

Members make between \$30,000 - \$200,000 a year; contains 3/5 of Americans.

Lower Class

Members make less than \$30,000 a year.

Working Class

Members from both the lower class and the upper class who make up to \$50,000 a year and have little or no savings or investments.

Working Poor

People who work hard but cannot seem to get ahead, they live paycheck to paycheck and struggle to make ends meet.

6. THE CREATIVE CLASS

There have been some major changes in the American class structure in the last 40 years, including the rise of what has been called many different labels:

- The Creative Class
- The New Upper Class
- The Educated Class
- The Bobos, or Bourgeois-Bohemians

Richard Florida, who labelled the term creative class, writes that if you are a scientist or engineer, an architect or designer, a writer, artist or musician, or if you use your creativity as a key factor in your work and business, in education, in health care, in law, in finance, or some other profession, then you are a member of the creative class.

IN CONTEXT

The creative class has accumulated advanced degrees--MAs, MSs, MBAs, PhDs, JDs. They tend to be decorated with degrees, and it's due to these people and their advanced degrees and talent that the cache of a basic BA isn't what it used to be. There are many students who graduated with a BA, who are saddled with a lot of debt, but without a lucrative job.

The economy has changed with the information society and globalization, such that it now rewards individual talent and creativity more than ever before. Everyone is essentially on their own--if you wish to get ahead, you're forced to venture out and make something of yourself by being an entrepreneur and using your creativity and talent to try to create something and be innovative.

It used to be that you could graduate high school and then go down the street and get a job at the

Ford company, for instance, and were therefore a 'company man' your entire career, or you were wealthy enough and you went on to college. You did one of the two. There aren't 'company men' anymore--companies gain or lose workers all the time--so instead you need to reinvent yourself as a brand, and as an entrepreneur, in order to stay hired across many different terrains, which is very difficult to navigate and illustrates the complexity of class.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about U.S. classes, exploring multiple theorizations of class by **Karl Marx**, **Neo-Marxism**, **Max Weber** and **Pierre Bourdieu**. You also learned about class defined in American **society**, and discussed some trends in the American class system, specifically the rise of the **creative class**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Upper Class

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Working Class

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