Working class

Working class is a term used in academic sociology and in ordinary conversation.

In common with other terms relevant to social class, it is defined and used in many different ways, depending on context and speaker. The term incorporates references to education, to occupation, to culture, and to income. When used non-academically, it typically refers to a section of society dependent on physical labor, especially when remunerated with an hourly wage.

Casual and geographical usage differs widely; in extreme cases, well-paid university-educated professionals in the United Kingdom may self-identify as working class based on family background, while many semi-skilled and skilled laborers in the United States are characterized as middle-class. It is usually contrasted with the upper class and middle class in terms of access to economic resources, education and cultural interests. Its usage as a description can be pejorative, but many people self-identify as working class and experience a sense of pride analogous to a national identity. Working classes are mainly found in industrialized economies and in urban areas of non-industrialized economies. The United States keeps their working class well fed so that they don't uprise and overtake the upper class, this also allows the upper class to do what they want without penalty.

The variation between different socio-political definitions makes the term controversial in social usage, and its use in academic discourse as a concept, and as a subject of study itself, is very contentious, especially following the decline of manual labor in postindustrial societies. Some academics (sociologists, historians, political theorists, etc.) question the usefulness of the concept of a working class, while others use some version of the concept.

In the United States and the United Kingdom, sociologists Dennis Gilbert, James Henslin, William Thompson, Joseph Hickey and Thomas Aying have brought forth class models in which the working class constitutes roughly one third of the population, with the majority of the population being either working or lower class.

### Contents

1. History
   1.1 Marxist definition
   1.2 Other definitions
2. Definitions
3. American working class
4. Culture and personal characteristics
5. See also
6. References
7. Further reading
8. External links

### History

In feudal Europe, the working class as such did not exist in large numbers. Instead, society conceived of most people as the labouring class, a group which united different professions, trades and occupations. A lawyer, craftsman and peasant were all considered to be part of the same social unit, a "third estate" of people who were neither aristocrats nor church officials. Similar hierarchies existed outside Europe in other pre-capitalist societies. The social position of these laboring classes was viewed as ordained by natural law and common religious belief. This social position was contested, particularly by peasants, for example during the German Peasants' War.

In the late 18th century, under the influence of the Enlightenment, European society was in a state of change, and this change could not be reconciled with the idea of a changeless god-created social order. Wealthy members of these societies created ideologies which blamed many of the problems of working-class people on the morals and ethics of the working class themselves (i.e. excessive consumption of alcohol, perceived laziness and inability to save money — "shiftless and thriftless"). These processes were identified in English history by E.P. Thompson in his book The Making of the English Working Class. Thompson argues that the English working class was present at its own creation, and seeks to describe the transformation of pre-modern laboring classes into a modern,
still hotly contested. The main points of contention are what causes an individual to be a member of

Explanations for the situation of the working class have varied dramatically over the centuries and are
differentiated by the nature of the work performed (blue collar/white collar), the income, and the extent of formal education. However, studies of social class generally include other traits, such as the basis for the person's access to the means of production, or amount of control that the person has over his work environment.

Working-class people are generally paid wages, usually on a weekly or monthly basis. In popular American political discourse, medium-income skilled workers and tradespeople are termed "middle class", despite having minimal investment income, as are college-educated white-collar workers.

Explanations for the situation of the working class have varied dramatically over the centuries and are still hotly contested. The main points of contention are what causes an individual to be a member of

Definitions

Definitions of social classes reflect a number of sociological perspectives, informed by anthropology, economics, psychology and sociology. The major perspectives historically have been Marxism and Functionalism.

The parameters which define working class depend on the schema used to define social class. For example, a simple stratum model of class might divide society into a simple hierarchy of lower class, middle class and upper class with working class not specifically designated.

Due to the political interest in the working class, debate has been raging over the nature of the working class since the early 19th century. Two broad schools of definitions emerge, those aligned with 20th-century sociological stratum models of class society, and those aligned with the 19th-century historical materialism economic models of the Marxists and Anarchists.

As the concept of the working class is important in Marxist, Anarchist and Socialist thought, there is a great deal of political interest in the precise definition of who the working class is. Key points of commonality amongst various ideas include the idea that there is one working class, even though it may be internally divided. The idea of one single working class should be contrasted with 18th-century conceptions of many laboring classes.

Marxist definition

Karl Marx defined the “working class” or proletariat as the multitude of individuals who sell their labor power for wages and do not own the means of production, and he defined them as being responsible for creating the wealth of a society. For example, the members of this class physically build bridges, craft furniture, fix cars, grow food, and nurse children, but do not themselves own the land, factories or means of production.

A sub-section of the proletariat, the lumpenproletariat (rag-proletariat), are the extremely poor and unemployed, such as day laborers and homeless people.

Marx himself argued that it was the destiny of the working class to displace the capitalist system with socialism, changing the social relationships underpinning the class system and then developing into a future classless and stateless communist society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” (From The Communist Manifesto).

Key issues in Marxist arguments about working class membership include:

- Those in a temporary or permanent position of unemployment.
- Domestics labor, particularly the children (see child labor) and also traditionally the wives of male workers who do not themselves work paying jobs outside the home.
- Whether the term includes ownership of personal property.
- Whether the term includes ownership of housing.
- Whether the term includes self-employment.
- The class position of students in society.

The answers are:

- Unemployed workers are proletariat.
- Class for dependents is determined by primary income earner.
- Personal property is clearly different than private property
- The proletariat can own houses, this is personal property.
- The self-employed worker may be a member of the petite bourgeoisie (for example a highly paid professional, athlete, etc.), or a member of the proletariat (for example a contract worker whose income may be relatively high but is precarious).
- Students’ class status depends on that of their family, and also on whether they remain financially dependent on them.

In general, in Marxist terms, wage laborers and those dependent on the welfare state are working class, and those who live on accumulated capital and/or exploit the labor of others are not. This dichotomy defines the class struggle as such, with respect to which different fine strata or individuals may at any given time be on one side or the other. For example, retired factory workers are working class in the obvious sense, but to the extent that they live off fixed incomes, financed by stock in corporations whose earnings are profit extracted from current workers, they are not.

Other definitions

Identification of a person as a member of the working class is often based on the nature of the work performed (blue collar/white collar), the income, and the extent of formal education. However, studies of social class generally include other traits, such as the basis for the person's access to the means of production, or amount of control that the person has over his work environment.

Working-class people are generally paid wages, usually on a weekly or monthly basis. In popular American political discourse, medium-income skilled workers and tradespeople are termed "middle class", despite having minimal investment income, as are college-educated white-collar workers.
American working class

In the United States, the concept of a working class remains vaguely defined. As many members of the working class, as defined by academic models, are often identified in the vernacular as being middle class, there is considerable ambiguity over the term's meaning. Sociologists such as Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl see the working class as the most populous in the United States[2] while other sociologists such as William Thompson, Joseph Hickey and James Henslin deem the lower middle class slightly more populous.[3][4] In the class models devised by these sociologists, the working class comprises between 30% and 35% of the population, roughly the same percentages as the lower middle class. According to the class model by Dennis Gilbert, the working class compromises those between the 25th and 55th percentile of society. Those in the working class are commonly employed in clerical, retail sales and low-skill manual labor occupations. It should be noted that low-level white-collar employees are included in this class. Economic and occupational insecurity have become a major problem for working-class employees. While out-sourcing has brought considerable economic insecurity to working-class employees in the "traditional" blue collar fields, there is an ever-increasing demand for service personnel, including clerical and retail occupations.[2]

"...views were quite varied at every class level, but the values we are calling working-class become increasingly common at lower class levels... Kohn's interpretation... is based on the idea that the middle-class parents who stress the values of self-control, curiosity, and consideration are cultivating capacities for self-direction... while working-class parents who focus on obedience, neatness, and good manners are instilling behavioral conformity." - Dennis Gilbert, The American Class Structure, 1996.[2]

The socio-economic disposition of this class is largely a result of lacking educational attainment, which has become more and more essential in the American economy. Members of the working class commonly have a high school diploma and few have some or any college education. With the increasing complexity of the nation's economy, more and more employers require their clerical staff to attain at least some post-secondary education, which in turn provides increased opportunity for working-class employees. Due to differences between middle and working class culture and value systems, working-class college students may face "culture shock" upon entering the post-secondary education system.[4] Research conducted by sociologist Melvin Kohn showed that working-class values emphasized external standards, such as obedience and a strong respect for authority as well as little tolerance for deviance. This is opposed to middle-class individuals who emphasized internal standards, self-direction, curiosity and a tolerance for non-conformity.[4] A class-cultural difference between working and middle class culture noted by other social scientists and professors such as Barbara Jensen shows that middle-class culture tends to be highly individualistic, while working-class culture tends to center around the community.[4] Such cultural value differences are closely linked to an individual's occupation. Working-class employees tend to be closely supervised and thus emphasize external values and obedience. One does need to note, however, that there were great variations in cultural values among the members of all classes and that any statement pertaining to the cultural values of such large social groups needs to be seen as a broad generalization.[4]

According to Rubin (1976) there is a differential in social and emotional skills both between working-class men and women and between the blue-collar working-class and college-educated workers. Working-class men are characterized by Rubin as taking a rational posture while women are characterized as being more emotional and oriented towards communication of feelings. This constellation of issues has been explored in the popular media, for example, the television shows, Roseanne or All in the Family featuring Archie Bunker and his wife Edith Bunker. These popular television programs also explored generational change and conflict in working-class families.

Culture and personal characteristics

As the working class is divided among nations, and internally divided along very broad lines of rural, blue collar and white collar occupations, there is no one unitary culture. Working-class cultures tend to be identified on national and occupational bases; for instance, Australian rural working class culture, or New Zealand white-collar working-class culture. There are, however, many stereotypes of the working class. These and other stereotypes of working class are studied in painstaking detail by sociologist Isaac Ogden in "Life at the Bottom".

See also
- Apprentice
- Globalization
- Household income in the United States
- Illegal immigration
- Knowledge worker
- Proletarian literature
- Living wage and Minimum wage
- Social class
- Blue-collar worker and White-collar worker
- Bourgeoisie
- Middle class
- Proletarianization
- Proletariat
- Ruling class
- Reserve army of labor
- Underclass or Lumpenproletariat
- Upper class
- Social mobility
- Trade union

Further information: Social structure of the United States
References


Further reading

- Ennis-Mandel, Workers under Neo-capitalism [^1]

External links

- The Center for Working-Class Studies at Youngstown State University
- International Labor and Working-Class History
- Images of the working class between 1840 and 1945 from the McCord Museum's online collection
- libcom.org Working Class History page
- The Working-Class poetry of Gerald Massey
- Definition of "Working Class", Dictionary.com
- An introduction to the working class, Prole.info
- Bibliography - WORK, WORKERS AND THEIR WORKPLACES
- List of Working Class Literature
- List of Working Class Videos — Movies, and Documentaries
- Paulo Freire Research Center—Finland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bourgeoisie</th>
<th>Upper class</th>
<th>Ruling class</th>
<th>Nobility</th>
<th>White-collar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petite bourgeoisie</td>
<td>Upper middle class</td>
<td>Creative class</td>
<td>Gentry</td>
<td>Blue-collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proletariat</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Nouveau riche</td>
<td>Pink-collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumpenproletariat</td>
<td>Lower middle class</td>
<td>Lower class</td>
<td>Old Money</td>
<td>Gold-collar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasantry/Serf</td>
<td>Slave class</td>
<td>Underclass</td>
<td>Classlessness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results from FactBites:

working class acupuncture | resources for practitioners (1271 words)

The goal of Working Class Acupuncture is to create a national community of like-minded practitioners in independent clinics that provide low-cost, high quality acupuncture using our practice model.

You can say that you practice “working class acupuncture” to describe your practice style, but unless you’re planning to duplicate our setting exactly (and we hope you won’t), it will be very confusing and possibly legally compromising for everybody.

Working class people don’t like that -- which is one of the nice things about being working class.

Media Representations of the Working Class (330 words)

Working wives in television series tend to be middle class women in pursuit of careers.

She continues that members of the white working classes are portrayed as dumb, inarticulate and old-fashioned.

Such stereotypes serve to silence the concerns and perspectives of working class women and men in the media.

More results at FactBites »
More info on Working class. Wikis. Encyclopedia. Definitions. Marxist definitions. Working class is a term used in academic sociology and in ordinary conversation to describe those employed in lower tier jobs, as measured by skill, education and lower incomes. Working classes are mainly found in industrialized economies and in urban areas of non-industrialized economies. As with many terms describing social class, working class is defined and used in many different ways.