



# The Concept of Social Class Applied to Post-Industrial Western European Societies

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## Abstract

The concept of «social class» has undergone a great number of transformations during the last decades. Among them, it is worth mentioning the consideration of social class as a notion associated with the most enriched human groups within a social group, and its consideration as a pure and exclusive term of Marxism. Little or nothing, however, can be articulated from such extremely reduced theoretical assumptions. This paper aims to expose how «social class» is a concept with social implications beyond its narrative, a concept fully linked to transformative and/or revolutionary action. It also explains how its nature has been modified for post-industrial societies in Western Europe during the twentieth century, and finally, and as a direct consequence of the above, how the concept has been gradually eliminated from political and public debate in general.

**Keywords:** Awareness; Lumpenproletariat; Marxism; Social Class; Social Division

## The Awareness of Social Classes and its Nature as a Concept

Considering that the term «social class» is simply a term is not new research. What is new, however, is to clarify how the relevance of the notion has gone through different stages, until it was practically abolished. In a first stage, the term took on a greater significance as such, a linguistic term related to revolutionary Marxist movements. In a second stage, its linguistic relevance was degraded to become practically insignificant in the present.

The reason that best explains why its social repercussion has declined was defined by the sociologist Bell D [1] when he stated that «social capital is the awareness of new opportunities and possibilities for advancement through new information and, most important, by acquiring connections», to which he added that the high levels of community exclusion were due to the increase in social mobility. Given

this situation, especially in relation to social mobility, Bell continues, «everyone is to blame», which in turn implies that «the allocative mechanism of society» forgets «the proper distribution of costs and resources» [1]. As a consequence, and in an extremely paradoxical way, members of social classes have seemed to forget that the economy mobilizes their needs, and not the economy their needs, so that «social class» no longer seems to require awareness.

Different social groups have forgotten the issue itself by ceasing to define themselves as a constant social group. Individualism has led to detachment, and detachment to disorganization. The renowned Weberian sociologist Parsons T [2], in his famous work *The Social System*, put this idea in the following words:

Discrimination is the very first condition of the construction of an object-world, and must continue to operate throughout all learning processes. Generalization on the other hand, by providing awareness of the common attributes of classes of

objects, is an indispensable condition of substitution, and of higher levels of organization of an orientation system [2].

His words evoke how the consciousness of a collective community seems to be only a term to define a social fact. «Class» does not define *sensu stricto*, but reflects, however. Something is defined by the notion «social class». As the Hungarian Marxist philosopher István Mészáros has pointed out, the level of self-awareness of the ruling elite might actually increase rather than decrease, enhancing rather than instantly destroying its ability to control [3], on what it expands that «irrespective of the question of what kind of product is at issue, from material goods to cultural entities», as its necessary prerequisite, under which the producing individuals are absorbed, they obliterate all consciousness of the unique productive actions and the corresponding relations of production at their roots [3].

The consciousness of the social classes has been conditioned and ultimately primed to strengthen the idea of identity in labor and economically negative terms. This does not mean, of course, that identity itself is a malicious concept or that it should be revoked. It simply means that identity, as with other cultural phenomena, can be channeled, directed or manipulated in capitalized political terms with the aim of generating repulsion between human groups. Different authors, among them Georg Sorel, William Graham Sumner or Georg Simmel, following the original ideas put forward by Karl Marx, dealt with this particularity from a non-racial point of view-today fully preponderant [4].

### Modification of the Concept of «Class» in the Post-Industrial European West

The concept of «social class» has needed to be repositioned within different Western historical conjunctures. Its significant root emanates from the advent and rise of tertiary and quaternary economic activities, shifting mainly from a development of wealth from manufacturing to a development based on knowledge, process automation and cheap mass labor. As a consequence, all forms of manual creativity have been impoverished through coercion, forced mobility and uprooting. In this context, the concept of «social class» has undergone radical modifications until its practical abolition, at least with respect to its original meaning, to a large extent given the events generated by a post-industrial production model that has become so deeply rooted in society that it considers it a *natural* part of its own process of accepted historical decadence.

A probable explanation, directly related to the nature of post-industrial societies, was offered by the French

sociologist scholar Touraine A [5], who argued that the symbolic function of social inheritance was more attached to pre-industrial and rural societies, but that the accumulation of capital and post-industrial institutionalization generated disorganization and reorganization [5], which in other terms can be understood as the cause of their pauperization.

The German concepts *Herrschaft* («Dominion» or «lordship»), *Klassenherrschaft* (Class rule) and *Klass* (class) itself have a negative nuance related to domination. The idea of «social class» is practically indiscernible from «class domination», something that has been little reviewed by contemporary Marxist critics. However, for both social class and social domination, it is necessary to become not only emotional but also material. The founding philosopher of modern conflict theory, Dahrendorf R [6], established in his own words an elegant explanation of the possible reasons that led the proletariat as a canonical social class not to perceive domination as such at the present time:

For there to be a revolution, the conflicts within a society have to become extremely intense. For conflicts to be intense, one would indeed expect its participants to be highly unified and homogeneous groups. But neither capital nor labor have developed along these lines. Capital has dissolved into at least two, in many ways distinct, elements, and so has labor. The proletarian, the impoverished slave of industry who is indistinguishable from his peers in terms of his work, his skill, his wage, and his prestige, has left the scene [6].

If nihilism was the political tool used in the second half of the 20th century to dilute the interests of the different segments of society, industrialization as a complete historical process was the material mechanism used for decomposition. The post-Fordism society or Self-Production society was characterized by the rise of a whole repertoire of new «activities», mainly labor, which deployed all forms of segregation of the traditional social classes. The new activities were equivalent to more segregation, but not to more underclasses or other social groups with common interests.

The renowned philosopher Habermas J [7] coherently defines the new logic of the social categorization of traditional classes, when he states that «the dominant status groups [...] and the mass of the population [...] change from classifications based on birth to politically guaranteed social classes based on possessions. The different strata are no longer differentiated only by the extent of their possessions, but by the way in which they acquire them, their position in the production process» [7]. The diversity of new activities mainly those relating to non-manual labor, where commercial

services stand out, could in fact offer the impression of a new world in which subclasses existed, but instead there was greater distance and social division among human groups.

Dahrendorf R [6] himself, in relation to the birth of the «new middle class» (*neuer Mittelstand*), puts it in the following terms: «along with the decomposition of both capital and labor a new stratum emerged within, as well as outside, the industry of modern societies [...]. [the situation has created] salaried employees in industry, trade, commerce, and public administration: that there is no word in any modern language to describe this group that is no group, class that is no class, and stratum that is no stratum» [6].

The most probable conclusion about the destabilization and lack of perspective on social class responds to the gradual but constant pauperization of ordinary life. Social groups have progressively developed a real diversification of existing human and economic capital. Given the latency and gradual staggering of measures, both the working class and the ruling class have found themselves in need and legitimized, respectively, to focus on other more mundane tasks beyond class consciousness.

### Pauperization of the Concept and Abolition in Public Debate

The reasons that have distanced the possibilities of social class awareness from everyday life are diverse and complex. One of the most relevant ones refers to the inference of the dominant classes on the most economically impoverished layers of society. In Karl Marx's words, the *lumpenproletariat* (the subproletariat) was composed of the «depraved and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie [...] scum, refuse, rubbish of all classes» [8]. Marx K [8] took the idea of the *lumpenproletariat* from Max Stirner's concept of «pauperism» (*Pauperismus*) to speak of the problems related to class consciousness (*Klassenbewusstsein*). It should be remembered that social class is not something materially homogeneous, even if ideally it is a useful notion.

With the reading of the work of the technocratic utopian Henri de Saint-Simon, it became clear to the early socialists that the proletariat (*des prolétaires*) held a critical social function for the exploiters of labor, until, with immediate effect given the advent of an increasingly liquid society, one could become an exploiter. At that point, the objectives of the class were no longer parallel, making its significance transformable, plastic and fully usable by other social strata. As the concept of «social class» is more easily manipulated, and given the passive character of the «subproletarian group» (*subproletarischen Gruppen*), this term could end up falling apart [9], partly because of the very interests that the *lumpenproletariat* pursues and believes it can achieve.

The classic statement stated by political economists Adam Smith, James Mill, David Ricardo or John Stuart Mill that production is guided by specific law, is rejected by Marx as nonsensical. Marx believed that economic laws are conventional and planned, and their objective is to reproduce social differences based on inequality. Given this circumstance, and once it is understood that class differences are necessary for domination, the most acceptable thing is to assume that certain social strata can conceive that they can overcome the reproduction of inequity and become part of the ruling class. Cultural fashions and trends in customs and habits can also be capitalized on.

However, there may be a reason why a class might not be interested in using the very notion of «social class». In relation to the lower strata of society, the *lumpenproletariat*, it might be interested in eliminating the conception of «class» as detrimental to its interests. If their chances of moving up the social hierarchy depend on or relate to their status, the *lumpenproletariat* might want to discard its use. In fact, Max Weber introduced as a contribution to the Marxist analysis of social classes an extraordinarily relevant element regarding their reproduction. Weber strongly introduces the idea of «status groups» and this is probably one of the most relevant differences between Marx's and Weber's philosophies.

Status determines the possibilities of mobility that exist for a social group as long as it participates in domination. While Marx approached his ideas concerning social classes as purely economically driven, and therefore the status is directly related to it, Weber continued and in a sense took up the classical meaning of the social hierarchical order based on occupation, descent (or lineage), prestige and honor. Be that as it may, the use of the term «social class» has declined with post-industrialism, mobility and the explosion of mass communication. The differences between those who «can exercise dominion» and those who «can be dominated», given the social plasticity that the latter wants to add to the concept, has not, however, reduced or abolished any aspect related to the possession of wealth.

### Conclusion

In the wake of post-industrialism, social classes have had to unravel their existence within a profuse political economy of migration, the development of unfree labor (enslaved, unpaid or forced), nationalism, post-colonialism, classism and racism. The early 20th century ideas of Fordism (from 1903) and Taylorism (from 1911) as models of industrial organization of chain labor production and the liberal ideas promoted by the politicians Ralph Assheton (1901-1984), Powell Enoch (1912-1998) or Keith Joseph (1918-1994) and the anti-union economists Friedrich Hayek (1899-1992) and Milton Friedman (1912-2006), produced an important

change in the consideration and political function of social classes. During the *postbellum* period (from 1945 onwards), an explanatory paradigm capable of exposing the nature of the problem related to the «narrative», argumentative and material plasticity of human groups appeared.

This explanatory model was the Migrant labor theory or Political economy of migration theory, and emanated from Stephen Castles and Godula Kosack's work *The Function of Labour Immigration in Western European Capitalism* (1973). The approach considered that large groups of migrant workers were in reality a «reserve army of labor», selling their labor force and responding to the new rationalized logic of the hitherto unknown international market. As an example, the model is able to explain one of the main reasons for the disintegration of the working social class, which went beyond the classic labor logic of white-collar work (for managerial or administrative jobs), the blue-collar worker (for manual labor), the wage-workers (salaried labor) or the black-coated (for employed office workers).

During the construction of social classes in Western Europe in the 19th century British historiography uses the dates 1780-1832 for England but it can be relatively applicable to the rest of Western Europe, various phenomena accompanied the historical fact. Among them we found the new space of production (mainly from the land of the countryside to the solid surface of industry), the particular relationship of the working social underclass with the clergy, the architecture of housing or the ability to communicate claims massively. However, one of the major changes brought about was the shift from manual to non-manual labor, from the real economy to the *pure* financial economy centuries before, large international commercial banks had already appeared, but at this time the technological situation accelerated the change. Probably the fluidity of lending,

new classes of craftsmen, future projects and services, the omnipresence of contemplative commerce and speculation, all this combined with non-manual work, produced the moral acceptance and the development of a whole new form of imagined possibilities, and given the social context, workers' concerns shifted from a class perspective to an individualistic one, where contradictions and complexity prevailed over collective interests.

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