

Outline for lecture for week 9: class.

Second in series of three ways of dividing / classifying / organizing people in society:

1. Race
 2. Class
 3. Nation
- plus gender, which we had earlier

- What do we mean by class?
- What is social class in America?
- What does class have to do with consumption?

Not all societies have social class. Simple societies don't.

1) What do we mean by class?

a) Is class some kind of economic ranking?

First impression most people have: income level of individuals.

Think about a truck driver with a high-school education who makes \$50,000 a year

And a high-school teacher with an M.A. who makes \$50,000 a year

Are they the same social class?

Lots of differences between them showing that income doesn't tell you much.

Ignores other economic indicators such as property-wealth

Ignores lifestyle elements

But more than anything, doesn't talk about power relations.

Another impression: income plus wealth

But again ignores groups: who associates with whom

Ignores lifestyle

ignores power relations

Class is not economic ranking economic ranking: economic ranking doesn't tell us much about the structure of society.

b) Is class some sort of grouping by social characteristic?

i) Marxists have seen it this way. Marx never defined class (story about dying as he was about to)

But Marxists have seen class as a **role in the social division of labor**. For example, in medieval society,

Royalty and aristocracy. Owned land, owned labor obligations of peasants, derived income from rents

Clergy: Also owned land and obligations, but derived income partly from this and partly from religious services.

Peasantry: Worked on the land, derived income from labor

Free peasants: held permanent rights to land, could move

Serfs: held land at sufferance of lords, could not move, could be sold

Urban artisans: small class who derived income from producing tools and other manufactured goods.

Merchants: Derived income from trade and speculation.

Obvious that in all these classes, there were different incomes. Rich peasant might be better off than a poor merchant, a middle artisan might be better off than a struggling clergyman, etc.

ii) Another way is to look at it as the role in the power structure. In the same medieval society,

Royalty and aristocrats commanded armies, levied taxes, conducted courts, etc.

Local clergy and free peasants might be politically powerful in their own communities, but subordinate to royalty and clergy.

Free merchants and artisans anomalous: ran their own affairs, not very subordinate to royalty and not at all to aristocrats.

Ordinary peasants no power at all, the lowest class.

These are not the same as wealth or income, or any kind of individual rank. Correlated, of course, but the richest merchant might be better off than most aristocrats or even the king. An unfree peasant or serf might have more income than a free artisan with a little workshop that wasn't doing too well. Etc. So best to say that income does not determine position in a social class. Rather, position in a social class has a great influence on income, and income changes allow mobility upward in a class system, sometimes downward also.

So we can define classes as

Groups

With some affiliation with each other

With a position in the social division of labor

With a position in the political power structure of the society

2) Class in America today

Really want people to read Fussell's tour/account. Out of date a little (didn't anticipate the internet or the internet boom and bust), but still basically accurate.

What are the positions of various classes in the social division of labor?

Top-out-of-sight and the upper classes live off income from property. They don't work, in any sense, not with their hands, nor with their mental skills. Or if they do, it is not for income; income comes from property.

Upper-middle, middle, all the way down to lower prole, all work, all earn livings for some kind of labor. If it's upper-middle it may be as a high executive, doctor, etc, or as an owner of a corporation who still runs it (like Bill Gates, who is at the very top of the upper-middle class, but by no means upper in this classification, though his descendants may be). If it's lower prole it may be as a construction worker or a clerk in a retail store. But all are wage-earners.

So then what makes some middle-class and others lower or, as Fussell calls it, prole? Partly the amount they're paid, but not entirely; a high school teacher may be middle class while a guy with a lawn service or an equipment driver may be middle prole, but they may own the same amount. Gets us into the lifestyle issues, which we'll get to soon enough.

Finally, destitute or bottom-out-of-sight live off of scrounging and handouts. No property, no wages. Hunters and gatherers.

How about power groups? Top-out-of-sight is irrelevant to power. Upper and upper-middle wield it. Senators and cabinet secretaries may be upper, as some presidents. Presidency moves one up--here I disagree with Fussell. Clinton's origins middle or lower prole, ended up upper-middle with a daughter who may be upper. Nixon solidly upper-prole origins; at the end of his life was upper.

But upper-middle and upper classes wield power according to their position in the social division of labor, which is to control the profits of the labor of others. This is why they always end up cutting taxes for the rich, why business always gets breaks, etc. Economic and political power go hand in hand, and are wielded almost exclusively by these two class groups.

3) Class and consumption:

Have seen that class is associated with income, and with wealth, but that these things don't determine class.

Have seen that classes relate to each other through division of labor; some live off the labor or taxes of others.

Have seen that classes have power relations, the uppers and upper-middles rule.

But class has another very important characteristic: You can only be a member of a class, and accepted as one, if you consume like one, act like one, have the manners of one.

Lots of comedies about how people are trying to pass as some other class. My Fair Lady illustrates it well: Higgins knows Eliza has to learn the accent of the upper-middle class, but he forgets about the manners until he visits his mother.

So what are the consumer characteristics of various classes. Think about, for example, music.

Classical

Jazz

Rock

 Heavy metal

 Grunge

 Fusion

 Techno

Country-and-Western

Or sports:

Tennis: upper- and upper-middle

Golf: used to be, but now spreads all the way to upper prole

 But different courses; golf still distinguishes

Pool: At home, upper. Outside, prole. Middle-class doesn't play

Basketball (as player): mostly prole, some middle. No upper middle or upper

As spectator: middle and upper-middle (NBA) middle and upper prole (college)

Bowling: Prole only

Or stores:

Bon Marche: resolutely middle or upper prole

Nordstrom: middle trying to be upper middle

Wal-Mart: Upper prole on down

Lamont's: Lost its class when the lower middle class went down. That kind of really dully respectability doesn't exist anymore.

Or alcoholic drinks

Scotch: Upper and aspiring to upper-middle, upper

Wine: Resolutely upper-middle and middle

None: Middle

Beer: Microbrews upper-middle

Watery, tasteless, he-man beers: prole

Middle doesn't drink beer

One could go on with a million things. Clothing, hairstyles, shoes, movies, cars, desserts, cheeses.

The point is, these things are like badges of class membership. You can't become a member of a class just by adopting its drink or its shoestyles, but if you are missing those things you are probably not a member of that class, or have a hard time being accepted.

4) Your assignment: Keep a log for two of the three days over the weekend. Write down every consumption decision you can (we'll forgive you if there are some things you'd rather keep private, but) the more the better. Clothes, food, music, TV programs, etc.

Then write a one-to-two page analysis of what these things say about where you think you fit in the American class system.