



# Class Structure

*By Malcolm F. Purinton*

We talk about class like it's always been a natural part of human life, but in fact we constructed it ourselves, based largely on what you do for work. Industrialization had a tremendous effect on work, and on class.

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## With Industry Comes Ideas

We've seen how the Industrial Revolution changed technology and working lives as it spread to new parts of the world. But it also transformed the environment, balances of power, where people lived, and social relationships. This article focuses on the last and most internal of these changes: social relations. How people saw themselves and those around them was greatly altered in this new, industrialized world.

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, most people around the world were peasants, farmers or caught fish. The small class that ruled them were land-owning nobles or aristocrats. The new jobs that industrialization demanded led to two big changes in systems of social class.

- First, industrialization led to the rise of wage-earning, working-class laborers (the proletariat) and a growing middle class (the bourgeoisie).<sup>1</sup>
- Second, people began to feel an affinity between themselves and other people living similar lives, even if they were from different communities and different areas.

This led to what we call class-consciousness. Class-consciousness arises when people believe they belong to a specific social and economic group.

Those new classes—the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—were not formed by some law or official statement. They came to exist because individual people believed they existed. This led to the development of an “us” and “them” class awareness.

We sometimes call class a *social construct*, because these ideas are created by society rather than having any concrete genetic or physical reality. In this case, people who became wealthy, perhaps as factory owners or industrial capitalists, saw themselves as being noticeably different than people who were poor. Poor factory laborers and domestic workers saw themselves as separate from the wealthy, and their shared experiences helped define their social group that came to be known as the proletariat.

## Urban proletariat

Rapidly changing patterns of production and distribution caused many people to move from rural farming areas in search of urban areas with industrial jobs in manufacturing and other industries. It wasn't an easy life. They had to live and work in unhealthy places with high death rates, urgent health problems, and an overall culture of misery. There was sewage in the streets, low quality food, and no clean drinking water, all contributing to major disease outbreaks. For instance, in the 1830s through the 1850s hundreds of thousands in Russia, France, and Great Britain were killed by a water-borne disease called *cholera*. Workers received no protections from the government or their employers and many believed they could never advance in the world. One misfortune, like losing a job or getting sick, could mean they lost their ability to provide for their families or themselves.

At the same time, many people were making a lot of money, namely the bourgeoisie. More than any other group, this middle class benefited from the rise in national incomes that came with more industrialization. Bankers, merchants, capitalists and factory owners could afford to buy all of the new industrial goods that factories were producing. The poor workers looked at the bourgeoisie as a separate social group from them—people with whom you would never expect to dine, play a game, marry or be friends. This recognition of difference enhanced their own idea of who was part of their class—the urban proletariat. In this way, class-consciousness spread and solidified as the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, the word proletariat will always refer to working class laborers, and bourgeoisie will always mean the middle class. These words get used a lot today, but sometimes the context can shift those meanings slightly.



rich got richer and the poor saw no gains in their wealth, health or happiness. In the industrializing nations of the long nineteenth century, social and economic classes soon came to represent groups with different goals, different politics and very different lives.

## Competition and consciousness

The development of class-consciousness was helped by rising levels of unemployment and stagnant (unchanging) wages that led to more competition between classes. A German visitor to England named Friedrich Engels published *The Condition of the Working Class in England* in 1844. It identified the connections between capitalism and the troubles of the working classes. He argued that industrial capitalism caused poverty for all industrial workers. Whether they worked in large factories or small workshops, whatever the actual job, they all felt the difficulties of being poor and realized they weren't alone. The working class recognized their identity as being different from the wealthy, and solidarity between workers spread.

Engels went on to work with Karl Marx, who wrote the *Communist Manifesto*. He believed that history was just a sequence of class struggles over economic wealth. The upper classes—whether kings and nobles or, later, factory owners—always oppressed the poorer working classes. Marx thought the future would bring a fight with the proletariat against the bourgeoisie and the upper classes. Marx believed that the workers would eventually succeed in overthrowing the bourgeoisie, just like the French revolutionaries had overthrown the French monarchy decades earlier.



*This 1894 illustration shows a middle-class townswoman talking with a working-class woman selling fish (“fisherfolk”). Their clothing fashions highlight their different classes. Public domain.*

## Class and working differences

As the quality of life in the cities improved over the nineteenth century, many ordinary people of the lower classes got better in some ways. They were able to live longer and healthier lives than their ancestors who worked in the fields growing crops to survive. The old aristocratic upper classes continued to exist as they had before industrialization, but they weren't as secure in their position. The newly rich business families of the bourgeoisie gained wealth and power from industrial growth in areas like manufacturing, banking, and trade. Over time, the distinctions between bourgeoisie and aristocracy became pretty blurry. Wealthy industrialists might be given titles by monarchs or they could marry into aristocratic families who needed the wealth of the industrialists. The growing middle classes saw many positive changes by the turn of the twentieth century. At the same time, the gap between the lower classes and everyone else was pretty extreme.

Many of the bourgeoisie became part of the government, helped run powerful corporations, or were professionals like merchants, lawyers and doctors. As these working professionals increased their wealth, they found they could spend their money on finer foods and leisure activities like dinner parties and entertainment. They imitated the upper-class lifestyle by vacationing at the beach or in the countryside, and they enjoyed new music and travel opportunities in their free time. In addition, team sports like cricket, rugby and soccer gained large followings and audiences. Alpine skiing, biking and hiking emerged as new recreations. In many cases, these activities were also available to the working classes, when they could afford it.

The middle classes developed another new thing amid all these activities, and that was a pretty strict moral code of behavior. It focused on making sure everyone was self-disciplined, hardworking, and striving for personal achievement in their daily lives. They started to state—and believe—that poor people had no one but themselves to blame for their disadvantages. Reformers<sup>2</sup> pointed to drunkenness and gambling as dangerous vices that controlled the weaker peoples while they focused on purity and fidelity as middle-class virtues. Some began to try to change the working classes to live according to their middle-class ideas of morality.

The urban working class developed several sub-classes based mostly on each worker's level of skill. The highly skilled might be construction bosses and factory foremen. They often adopted and strictly obeyed middle class morality to look and act like they were middle class themselves. Factory and construction workers could be considered semi-skilled. They often worked in textile factories and woolen mills, where you would find many working women as well. At a lowest level of the working class were the day laborers such as longshoremen, who worked on the docks loading and unloading ships, and domestic servants, who worked in the homes of middle-class families. They were considered unskilled, even if they actually had plenty of skill!

## Mass politics and classes

As urbanization and industrialization expanded, so did class and national consciousness. People of all classes sought to either keep their political power or gain more influence. Workers wanted better pay, better safety and fewer hours. They sought to gain these through greater political influence. Many workers formed unions that worked together to effect change through strikes and collective bargaining. New political parties were formed to address working-class issues. Those included many socialist parties in nations across Europe, who were influenced by Marxist ideas.



*Workers leaving the factory at the end of the day in 1900. Public domain.*

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<sup>2</sup> A reformer, in general, is someone who seeks to change things for the better. In this context, though, the “improvement” is specific to those who condone this strict moral code, and who see their own example as an ideal that others should live by.

By the time World War I began in 1914, the class structures of the industrial and urban worlds had changed considerably over the previous 100 years. The old aristocratic class was still at the top of the social pyramid, but its wealth had declined. As a result, the aristocrats became tied more closely to the growing wealth of the newly rich middle class (bourgeoisie). While the bourgeoisie was pretty small through the first half of the nineteenth century, this group, situated in the middle of the post-industrial pyramid, greatly expanded, gaining much more influence. But the working classes (proletariat), or those at the bottom of both pyramids, very slowly gained more political power in some places. This power was something that really hadn't existed before the Industrial Revolution. However, by 1914, the proletariat still suffered from a wide income gap, and continued to remain at the bottom of the pyramid. This gap would deeply impact the events that were about to happen on the global stage.

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### Image credits

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