Inequality and Stratification: Class, Color, and Gender

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Robert A. Rothman
University of Delaware

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Chapter 6
Class Consciousness

SUBJECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF INEQUALITY AND STRATIFICATION

It is apparent that people are sensitive to the extremes of social inequality in their society. In fact, when asked if there is anything they are not particularly proud of about the United States a full one third volunteer either "inequality" or "poverty" (Robinson, 1983). Such responses are not unexpected, for it is virtually impossible to miss the social and economic discrepancies manifest in the clothing, homes, consumer goods, and lifestyles of the people we all encounter in the everyday routine of our lives. Even the more comfortable middle-income group, socially insulated from direct contact with both the poor and rich, cannot escape the media that bring them details of those living at the extremes of society. Popular magazines glorify the lifestyles of the rich and famous while television documentaries present graphic images of the plight of the poor and homeless.

The broader question of perceptions of a class structure is a much more complex matter than merely being sensitive to gross economic inequalities. *Class consciousness* as a general term focuses on subjective sensitivity to the division of society into relatively distinct groups or classes. There are different forms of class consciousness, ranging from the cognitive—recognition of a hierarchy of classes—to the behavioral—taking direct action to enhance class-based interests.

For analytic purposes it is possible to identify, as shown in Exhibit 6.1, five different levels of class consciousness (Morris & Murphy, 1966; Hazelrigg, 1973). *Nonawareness* prevails among those members of society who fail to recognize or accept class divisions. *Class awareness* is the lowest level of class consciousness and involves recognition of the division of society into two or more groups. Because people may be aware of divisions but unwilling to locate themselves in that system, *class identification* is used to take the step of self-placement in a particular class and presupposes recognition of other classes. *Class solidarity* implies a sense of unity with and having the same values and interests as other members of the same class. Class solidarity also means sensitivity to other classes with divergent values and interests. *Class action* means taking, or being willing

Exhibit 6.1
Types of Subjective Awareness of Social Stratification

CONCEPT	Non-awareness	Awareness	Identification	Solidarity	Action
DIMENSIONS		Cognitive	Cognitive Attitudinal	Cognitive Attitudinal	Cognitive Attitudinal Behavioral
MEASUREMENT		Verbalization	Verbalization Self-placement	Verbalization Self-placement Reference Group Differential Association	Verbalization Self-placement Reference Group Differential Association Behavior

to take, some overt action to further the perceived interests of the class. This level of consciousness implies a degree of confrontation or conflict with other classes.

As Karl Marx observed in his use of the term *klasse an sich*, classes will be no more than aggregates of people if those distinctions do not shape the awareness, attitudes, and behavior of individuals. At some places in his writings he argued for the inevitability of class conflict,—that is, members of the emerging urban industrial proletariat would develop a collective consciousness and subsequently take action to overthrow the ruling bourgeoisie. Consequently, the logic of this model suggests a developmental process from awareness to class action, with one level being a condition for the development of the next level of consciousness. In practice, people's perspectives do not necessarily follow this pattern, and it is common for people to hold attitudes that might seem inconsistent. The United States is certainly not on the verge of armed class conflict, nor do Americans exhibit the same level of allegiance to trade unions or class-based political parties found in European nations, but that does not mean that Americans do not visualize society as divided into classes and express some feelings of solidarity with others at the same level.

CLASS AWARENESS

Systematic studies of sensitivity to class divisions date back to the 1940s (Centers, 1949). Any attempt to measure class awareness raises complex methodological problems. The major problem is that the very process of posing the question of classes can alert people to the issue, encouraging

them to think about a matter not previously considered relevant. Or they may feel pressure to give a particular response because they believe that it is appropriate or socially acceptable. Some researchers have attempted to deal with this problem by determining if people will spontaneously raise the issue of classes (e.g., Leggett, 1968). Of course, the failure to volunteer class-based answers does not demonstrate that people are unaware of them, merely that they did not volunteer them.

With these limitations in mind there is consistent evidence that Americans see society as divided into social classes. Only a very small number of people—usually less than 2 or 3 percent—challenge the existence of a hierarchical division of society by asserting that the United States is a classless society. There is some indication that most people spontaneously visualize three classes: extremes of wealth and poverty and a broad intermediate group (MacKenzie, 1973: 117). There is apparently a strong tendency for Americans to think of themselves as "middle class." However, when prompted they are willing and able to accept finer distinctions within this broad intermediate class, namely, a basic division between a working class of blue-collar workers and a middle class of white-collar workers, and even an upper middle class of professional and managerial people. Very few people see a basic cleavage between just two classes.

A key issue in the examination of class consciousness is the criteria people use to define social class membership. On the surface it would appear that class is strictly an economic concept, because Americans tend to rely on words such as "rich," "millionaire," "poor," and "average" to describe members of different classes. Moreover, when forced to mention one single factor Americans will usually mention income. In contrast, occupation seems to play a much greater role in defining class in Canada and Britain (Butler & Stokes, 1974; Pammett, 1987; Bell & Robinson, 1980; Grabb & Lambert, 1982). However, more detailed analysis shows that class has a much more complex meaning. Class encompasses a number of specific factors, with lifestyles (73 percent), beliefs and attitudes (69 percent), occupation (68 percent), income (60 percent), education (59 percent) and family background (49 percent) all being rated as either "very important" or "somewhat important" in defining class position (Jackman & Jackman, 1983: 37). These factors may be interrelated, suggesting that people have a multidimensional, not a single, unidimensional, concept of class.

CLASS IDENTIFICATION

The vast majority of Americans are also willing to identify themselves as members of a specific social class (Centers, 1949; Schreiber & Nygreen, 1970; Jackman & Jackman, 1983). Most studies show that over 95 percent

Exhibit 6.2
Occupation and Class Identification

	Class Identification				
	Poor	Working	Middle	Upper Middle	Upper
Professional	<1%	17%	62%	20%	<1%
Managerial	<1	20	59	18	2
Sales	3	22	61	12	1
Clerical	7	43	41	9	0
Crafts workers	5	53	39	3	<1
Operatives	10	53	35	<1	1
Service	22	46	30	2	<1
Unskilled	17	51	30	1	0
Totals	8	37	43	8	1

Class identification is reported for those who responded to the following question: "People talk about social classes such as the poor, the working class, the middle class, the upper-middle class, and the upper class. Which of these classes would you say you belong in?" Source: Mary R. Jackman and Robert W. Jackman. *Class Awareness in the United States.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), Table 4.1, p. 73. Copyright © 1983 by the University of California Press.

can locate themselves in the stratification system (see Exhibit 6.2). Moreover, they also found that most people report strong attachment to their class. When asked about the intensity of their feelings, a full half reported feeling "very strongly" about their membership in that class. Another 28 percent reported "somewhat strong" feelings, and only one in five defined their attachment as "not too strong" (Jackman, 1979).

The data on class identification reported in Exhibit 6.2 are organized by occupation and show a correspondence between structural position and subjective identification, emphasizing the importance of work in shaping the broad outlines of the stratification system. A majority of professionals and managers think of themselves at the upper end of the stratification system, choosing the middle class or upper-middle-class label. Sales workers also tend to make the same distinctions. Clerical workers typically divide themselves into middle class or working class. A much clearer pattern is found in the blue-collar occupations, where a majority of crafts workers and factory workers place themselves in the working class, although about one third favor the middle-class designation. Some service workers and the unskilled are the most likely to identify with the poor.

As would be expected education and income modify class identification. People with less formal education and lower incomes will rate themselves at lower levels. This is apparent among that segment of blue-collar

and service workers who identify with the poor and among the better educated and better paid clerical workers who identify with the middle class. Thus, increments of income and education cause people to locate themselves in a higher or lower class than other people at the same occupational level.

CLASS SOLIDARITY

The idea of class solidarity proceeds a step beyond self-identification and focuses on the extent to which people feel a sense of unity with other members of the same class, based on shared values and interests. Although there is some sense of compatibility with members of the same social class who are perceived as sharing similar values and lifestyles, this perspective does not widely extend to feelings that classes have *conflicting* economic and political interests. Rather, people are more likely to feel that classes have divergent but not incompatible interests. Thus, blue-collar workers might agree that they have different interests than managers but simultaneously feel that all classes are members of a "team" in which each makes an essential contribution (MacKenzie, 1973). It is uncommon for people to see different classes as "enemies" (Manis & Meltzer, 1954). This holds true despite the fact that there are strong feelings among the middle and lower levels of society that the political and economic system is tilted in favor of the wealthy. For example, surveys show that a majority of Americans believe owners and corporate executives have disproportionate influence on the government (Kluegel & Smith, 1986: 120).

It has been suggested that one of the major reasons that individuals do not develop a sense of solidarity with other members of their class is that potential class loyalties are overwhelmed by internal divisions based on income, race, ethnicity, and other factors that serve to divide rather than unite. Race appears to be among one of the most salient sources of diversity. One survey revealed only 19 percent of whites and 26 percent of blacks thought they shared "a lot" of common interests with members of the other race in the same social class (Colosanto & Williams, 1987).

CLASS ACTION

This form of class consciousness exists when overt action is taken in an attempt to further the interests of a class or to inhibit the interests of some other class. This form of behavior is rare in the United States, which is not surprising considering that few people see classes separated by divergent interests. Only small numbers of workers express interest in joining with others in picketing or other actions (Leggett, 1968). Labor unions and political parties have been the focus of class interests and have acted as

institutionalized instruments of class action in some European nations but have not developed in that direction in the United States.

Labor Unions

The economic and political activities of manual workers in industrializing nations late in the nineteenth century represented attempts to develop broadly based working-class organizations, taking the form of open challenges to capitalism and attempts to unite *all* workers. In the United States the Western Federation of Miners was one of the groups that sought to "abolish the wage system" (Dubofsky, 1969). The Knights of Labor recruited at the class level, seeking to unite all working people—skilled and unskilled, women and men, white and black—except for liquor dealers, professional gamblers, bankers, and stockbrokers, under the slogan that "an injury to one is the concern of all" (Bailey, 1956: 538). At its peak in the 1880s the Knights claimed a membership of 1 million workers out of an urban labor force of 10 million. Broadly based blue-collar labor movements emerged in some European countries such as France (Hanagan, 1980) but not in the United States.

Many factors combined to undermine the labor union movement. Employers staunchly resisted the movement and the government often came to the aid of employers, for example, with federal troops used to quell railroad strikes in 1877 and again in 1894. Over the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century the Knights and other more radical unions such as the Western Federation of Miners, were superseded by the American Federation of Labor representing the skilled trades. The AFL took a more moderate and less confrontational stance and was able to win important concessions on wages, hours, and working conditions for members of specific occupations.

Unskilled and semiskilled factory workers were largely ignored by the AFL, in part because such jobs tended to be filled by racial and ethnic minorities, which separated them from crafts workers who were typically native-born (Mink, 1986). The devastating economic dislocation of the 1930s stimulated successful attempts to unionize whole industries—auto workers, steel workers—represented by the rival Congress of Industrial Organization. The unionization of these industries was not accomplished without strikes and violence, but the CIO did finally establish the right of unions to exist and collectively bargain for their members.

The AFL and CIO became one union in 1955, and organized labor today acts as an interest group in Washington (and the state capitals), lobbying for all workers' interests in such things as occupational safety, worker privacy, and minimum wage legislation and supporting pro-labor candidates for political office. Unions are able to exert some influence on the voting choices of its members, but it is very modest (Juravich & Shergold,

1988), and strikes are an effective weapon in increasing wages (Rubin, 1986).

At the end of the 1980s union membership was continuing a steady decline—standing at about 17 percent of the work force. Contracting membership reflects a number of factors, including an erosion of the traditional blue-collar industries such as steel and automobiles combined with limited success in unionizing white-collar and service workers. Unions represent but a small segment of the working class, and in the process of increasing the wages of this segment, have increased the economic discrepancy between the top and bottom of the working class (Form, 1985). Thus, although unions provide economic advantages for some workers, internal cleavages based on occupation, income, stability of employment, skill levels, race, and gender within the working class continue to divide it.

Political Parties

Political parties in some industrial democracies articulate the interests of specific classes. This is most evident in Western European nations that have parties, such as Labour (Britain) or Social Democrat (Germany), that expressly pursue working class interests. In contrast, the major American political parties have typically been loose coalitions rather than ideological groups. It is true that the Democratic party in the United States between the 1930s and the 1970s was able to solidify a high level of working-class support at the national level, and Democrats occupied the White House for most of those years. Party support was built on a coalition of blue-collar workers, religious, racial, and ethnic minorities in the aftermath of the great depression. These groups favored liberal economic policies and governmental intervention to buffer the effects of capitalism. Although attracting blue-collar workers, the party more than once chose members of the elite to be its national standard-bearer (e.g., John F. Kennedy) and has long depended on the financial support of wealthy southerners (Ferguson & Rogers, 1986).

A number of contemporary observers see the defection of large numbers of blue-collar workers to recent Republican presidential candidates, such as Ronald Reagan and George Bush, as signalling the demise of this coalition (Brown, 1991; Edsall & Edsall, 1991). The male, white working-class core of the party is apparently becoming disillusioned with what they perceive as undue attention to the other constituents of the party: the poor, women, and people of color. Thus, the common interests that once united the disadvantaged are being overwhelmed by divergent interests (e.g., tax relief, affirmative action) that tends to pit former political allies against each other.

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE WORKING CLASS

Much attention has been devoted to class consciousness among blue-collar workers, in large part because of the major historical role assigned to this group by Karl Marx. It is clear that a certain configuration of characteristics is likely to increase working-class identification among manual workers. Union members and the youngest, least educated, lowest paid, most dissatisfied manual workers with the least discretion are the most likely to locate themselves in the working class (Zingraff & Schulman, 1984). The most obvious conclusion is that the most disadvantaged blue-collar workers identify with the working class while the more advantaged are more likely to place themselves in the middle class.

With respect to the working class, sociologists have long sought to understand why blue-collar workers fail to develop a sense of solidarity with the poor and lower level white-collar workers, who often encounter the same kinds of work experiences (a lack of discretion and responsibility), and why this group seldom presses for dramatic changes in the political economy despite the belief that the economic and political system is biased in favor of a wealthy minority.

Studies of male blue-collar workers in stable, well-paying jobs suggest that part of the answer may be found in the fact that they simultaneously perceive two hierarchies rather than one and locate themselves in both (MacKenzie, 1973; Halle, 1984). One identity is based on the characteristics of their work and leads them to divide the world into four classes—the rich, the poor, a broad middle class of white-collar workers, professionals, and managers, and the working class. Blue-collar workers perceive a definite and fundamental distinction between those who are working people and those who are not. One important feature is the attributes of the work—productive, manual, strenuous, difficult, and dangerous (Halle, 1984). The other feature is control and authority, or more precisely, the lack of it (Vanneman & Pampel, 1977). Thus their work and their class position are determined by the type of work they do and their subordination to the orders of organizational superiors. Managers certainly do not work, merely hiring others to work. Other white-collar workers are often characterized as doing nothing that is productive and meaningful—"working with their mouths" or "shuffling papers" or even doing nothing literally ("They just sit on their butts all day"). Thus, there is a sense of working-class identification, but it is clearly bounded, limited to those who engage in certain kinds of physical and manual work.

The concept of "working man" also includes considerations of class, color, and gender (Halle, 1984). The poor are not working people, for they are unable or unwilling to work. An emphasis on working-class tasks as strenuous, dirty, and dangerous has traditionally also made them "men's" tasks in the minds of many, just as clerical work is defined as "women's"

work. The recent movement of larger numbers of women into blue-collar areas is contributing to a reevaluation of the concepts of both class and gender. A person's race or ethnicity is also important, apparently more important than any definition of social class. Therefore, blacks and Hispanics may do the same kind of work or have similar lifestyles but tend not to be accepted as members of the same class. People's race or ethnicity is powerful enough to divide them from other blue-collar workers.

Another blue-collar perspective on the class system is based on education, income, and material possessions. They have education comparable to that of white-collar workers and their income allows them to enjoy consumer goods and live in pleasant neighborhoods with white-collar families. Hence they also identify themselves as middle class, a very broad and amorphous group based largely on similar lifestyles. There is such diversity in this group that it is difficult to draw a line between the middle class and the rich at the top of the system and the poor at the bottom.

Halle's study also offers another insight. He suggests that confrontational class action does not develop because there is a strong commitment to America as a system of government superior to all others. Although there is widespread belief in corruption among politicians and control of the government by economic interests, this rarely translates into attraction for radical restructuring of society. For one thing, the basic system is believed to be sound, but has been subverted by the actions of people. Moreover, the lure of alternative political systems is dampened by the belief that reform could only be accomplished at the expense of individual liberty and freedom.

FAMILY, GENDER, AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

The question of the formation of class consciousness is made more complex by the fact that many families include spouses occupying different class levels. As shown in Exhibit 6.3 somewhere between one half and two thirds of all employed husbands and wives are in occupations that would place them in different classes. The concentration of women in clerical and retail sales work is a major factor in accounting for this pattern.

There is some tendency for people to "borrow" selected characteristics from their spouse when locating themselves in the system, using the higher level attainments of the other and consequently raising their own class level. This process occurs among both women and men, but it appears to be most likely for married women not in the paid work force to rely on their husband's work, educational level, and income in defining their class placement. This is no doubt due in part to the fact that the role of unpaid homemaker is unclear in a class system centered on either occupation or economic lifestyle. Moreover, this way of thinking about class is grounded in the tradition of defining the male as the head of the household and

Exhibit 6.3
Class Location of Husbands and Wives, 1987

Occupation of Husband	Occupation of Wife								
	M	P	T	S	Cl	Cr	O	S	NE
Managerial	14	16	3	8	25	1	2	6	27
Professional	9	28	2	7	18	1	2	6	27
Technical	10	15	7	6	24	1	3	9	26
Sales	10	11	3	14	23	1	3	7	27
Clerical	8	9	4	7	28	1	6	10	26
Craft	6	7	2	9	22	3	9	12	30
Operative/unskilled	4	4	2	8	20	2	13	14	31
Service	7	7	2	8	20	2	5	19	31
Not employed	8	11	2	12	25	3	12	25	<1

Note: Data for married couples with earnings in 1987, excluding members of the armed forces. Rows do not add to 100 due to rounding.
Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census. Current Population Reports, P-60, No. 165. *Earnings of Married Couple Families, 1987*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, Table 2, p. 10.

implies that homemakers use the family as the unit of analysis in locating themselves in the stratification system.

The situation differs for married women in the paid work force. When employed, there is still a tendency toward "borrowing," but indications are that borrowing is losing its salience. Women in the 1980s, compared to women in the 1970s, are more likely to determine their class position on the basis of their own occupational and educational accomplishments than those of their husbands (Davis & Robinson, 1988). Several factors have apparently contributed to the increasing salience of women's own workplace experiences. The most obvious is that increasing numbers of women are in the paid labor force. In addition, the instability of marriage means that more women can anticipate having to support themselves from their own work at some point in their lives. Moreover, more women are moving into jobs that offer more rewards and challenges.

With respect to class placement there is also some indications that men and women have different concepts of class, at least in the distinction between working class and middle class (Robinson & Kelley, 1979; Simpson & Mutran, 1981; Vanneman & Cannon, 1987; Simpson, Stark & Jackman, 1988). The most important factors contributing to identification with the working class are employee status (as opposed to self-employed), being in a female-dominated job, and membership in a union; the lack of authority, which is so important in fostering working-class identification among men, is apparently somewhat less important for women. Rosen (1987: 72) suggests that women are not less sensitive to their subordina-

tion, merely more inclined to accommodate to it than to make it a major source of potential conflict.

CONCLUSION: Factors Mitigating Against Class Consciousness

Americans seem to recognize a hierarchy of classes and their position in it. It appears that no single factor defines class, but rather that class encompasses a structural dimension—type of work, authority or lack of it, an economic dimension (income), and a behavioral dimension (lifestyle). Although there is a sense of commonality with others in the same situation, it does not extend to strong feelings of discrepant interests or willingness to mobilize to pursue structural change or a redistribution of resources. Marx was sensitive to the failure of Americans to develop a sense of *klasse fur sich*. A number of factors have been offered to explain the absence of clearly articulated feelings of class consciousness in American society, especially among the less advantaged segments of society. The dominant ideology of opportunity played a role, but so too did a combination of social, organizational, economic, and political factors.

It is common to argue that American history has, in some important ways, been unique. Formed as a new nation in the eighteenth century, the United States lacked the feudal tradition of a hereditary aristocracy so common to many European nations (Bottomore, 1966). In addition, important political rights (suffrage) and the legal guarantees incorporated in the Bill of Rights were slowly extended to ever greater segments of the population. Industrialization produced widespread prosperity and made it possible for large numbers of people to enjoy a relatively high standard of living. Thus, it is argued that American society did not produce the widespread deprivation that would be likely to foster broadly based discontent. This approach has some validity, but there were more specific factors at work.

The organization of industrial work following the principles of Taylorism imposed strict discipline on workers and created artificial but powerful divisions among workers (Braverman, 1974). The detailed specialization and narrowing of jobs rendered workers easily replaceable and weakened their collective power. At the same time that these developments were occurring waves of immigrants swelled the population and created divisions that worked against feelings of solidarity among those similarly situated. The diversity of their cultural and religious heritages impeded communication and often produced hostility and antagonism. These antagonisms often had economic bases, for minorities often competed for the same jobs. Employers actively exploited ethnic divisions in battles against unions, using members of minority groups as strikebreakers (Foner, 1964). Women were similarly used this way (Baron, 1980). Consequently, the

potential for solidarity based on common economic position was subverted by the disintegrating factors of race, ethnicity, and gender.

The dominant ideology of American culture is also a factor. The ideology emphasizes individualism, and most Americans seem to believe they are just about where they belong in the system considering their talents and efforts. Blue-collar workers explain their position in personal terms rather than in the workings of the economic system (Halle, 1986: 169). They are likely to cite their intellectual limitations or lack of effort in school, or that they lacked the boldness to set up their own business.

Another factor inhibiting the development of group consciousness is the characteristic belief in an open opportunity structure and the chance for individual mobility that permeates all levels of the society. Polls indicate a majority of Americans continue to believe there is plenty of opportunity for those who work hard. In addition, most feel that they have more opportunity than did their parents' generation. These beliefs are, to some extent, supported by their own experiences, for many are the children or grandchildren of immigrants who have been able to improve their relative position in society significantly.

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