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

The Industrial Revolution began around 1760. We've seen how important it was. It introduced many new forms of technology. It changed the work people did. But it also changed how people saw themselves and others.

Before the Industrial Revolution, most people around the world were peasants. People lived by farming on land owned by other people. The small class that owned the land were nobles or aristocrats. Industrialization created many new kinds of jobs. It also made some people very rich. This led to two big changes.

- First, two new classes emerged. One was made up of industrial workers. It is known as the proletariat, or working class. The other was a growing middle class. It is known as the bourgeoisie.[1]
- Second, people began to feel a connection between themselves and other people living similar lives. This led to what we call class-consciousness.

These two classes were not formed by some new law. Class differences came to exist because people believed these differences existed. This led to an "us" and "them" way of thinking.

We sometimes call class a *social construct*. This is because the idea of a social class is created by society, not because of biological or physical traits. Factory owners and other rich people saw themselves as very different from the poor. Meanwhile, poor workers saw themselves as separate from the rich. Both groups began to identify strongly with their own class.

Urban proletariat

The Industrial Revolution created an increase in factory work. Many people moved from the countryside to cities for factory jobs. It was not an easy life. Workers had to live and work in very unhealthy places. Many fell sick. For example, in the 1830s through the 1850s hundreds of thousands were killed by a disease called *cholera*. This happened in Russia, France and Great Britain. Workers everywhere had no rights. Their bosses or governments did not help. If a worker became sick, they might lose everything.

At the same time, the bourgeoisie were making a lot of money. Bankers, merchants and factory owners became very rich. This money provided the rich with new industrial goods made in factories. Poor workers looked at the bourgeoisie as a separate social group from them. They were people you could never befriend or marry. This difference strengthened class consciousness.

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1 The proletariat are also known as the working class. The bourgeoisie are also known as the middle class. Sometimes both words are used in a slightly different way.

Competition and consciousness

Over time, the rich got richer. Yet, the poor stayed poor. A German in England named Friedrich Engels wrote criticisms of this system. His work was called *The Condition of the Working Class in England* and was published in 1844. His book said the industrial system was bad for all industrial workers. It made them poor and it kept them that way.

Karl Marx was another important thinker about class. Marx wrote the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) with Engels. He believed the upper classes always took advantage of the poorer working class. This had been true of the landowning nobleman. Now it was just as true of the factory owner. Marx thought the proletariat would rise up against the bourgeoisie. He believed the workers would win in the end.

Class and working differences

During the 1800s, cities slowly became safer and cleaner. As a result, things got better for the proletariat. They lived longer and healthier lives. At the same time, they remained much poorer than everyone else.

The bourgeoisie became more and more powerful. Businessmen became rich from manufacturing, banking and trade. The richer they became, the more power they had. Many of the bourgeoisie became part of the government. Others helped run big companies. Still others worked as merchants, lawyers or doctors.

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.

The bourgeoisie began to believe the poor were the cause of their own problems. The poor just did not work hard enough, they said. Poor people drank too much and gambled too much. Reformers[2] tried to get workers to stop drinking and gambling. They said it was for their own good.

The old aristocratic upper class continued to exist. But it lost some of its power and money. Over time, the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy drew closer. Some rich businessmen were given aristocratic titles. Others married into aristocratic families.

The urban working class had smaller, sub-classes based on skill level. At the top, the most skilled were construction bosses and factory foremen. This group adopted middle-class behaviors. Below them were the semi-skilled, like textile factory workers. The lowest level was for the day laborers. These people were considered unskilled and worked at docks or as domestic servants.

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2 Reformers are people who try to change things for the better. But not everyone agrees that what reformers want really would be better. Reformers often believe other people should live the way they do.

Mass politics and classes

Poor workers tried to better their lives. They pushed for better pay and safer workplaces. Many formed unions to work together and fight for changes. New working-class political parties were formed. Many were guided by Marxist ideas.

By 1914, the class structure had changed greatly. The old aristocratic class was still at the top of society. But it had grown poorer and had lost much of its power. The bourgeoisie had grown much larger. It was more powerful than ever. The proletariat had slowly won more political power in some places. But it still remained far poorer than the other classes.

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

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This 1894 illustration shows a middle-class townswoman talking with a working-class woman selling fish (so she is "fisherfolk"). Their clothing fashions highlight their different classes. Public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:PUK1894p341.jpg

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