

Class and identity

Class and Identity

- **Distinct social formations made up of groups of people**
- There are different strata in a hierarchy – those at the top are favoured more than those at the bottom
- It has been suggested that there are four basic systems of stratification that have existed in human societies
- There are distinct social formations that make up groups of people
- And these people often have common social and cultural positions
- As well as similar patterns of property ownership, power and material rewards
- There have been many studies that link class and other dimensions of social class but, actually the concept is not clear cut
- Social class is a highly contested concept and there is little agreement over its meaning, measurement and how it should be used for explanations

Occupation and class

- We often ask people what they do
- And it is suggested that this question mirrors understanding about how we see ourselves, how we see the world and how we see others
- **Relationship between occupation and identity**
- How we feel about what we do, or lack of a job, or as a student, depends partly on how others see us
- One notion of our identity is shaped by how we perceive ourselves in terms of future or present income.
- People are classified according to household income which allows for the number of people in a household and their ages
 - Income is based on a couple without children
 - So there is the notion of average income, by which we measure ourselves
- **Definitions of poverty vary**
- Poverty is a concept with different meanings
- It is a label that we might accept or reject
- People might talk about making ends meet on low incomes when mentioning poverty
- The number of people living at or below the median household income is often used as a definition of those counted as poor in the UK
- A lack of a computer could constitute deprivation if all other children have one, and it becomes a means of communication and a cultural reference point
- **Media representations of differing social classes**
- The idea of being poor carries a stigma

- There are often news reports about people scrounging on benefits – and these are depicted as lazy and irresponsible.
- Representations of the poor in British culture is often demeaning

what class are you?

Different laws for different classes

- Various British Social Attitudes Surveys suggest that social class provides us with a sense of belonging.
- It can tell us who we are and who other people think we are and how we relate to the world around us
- People tend to associate those who share the same common values, beliefs and behaviours as belonging to a particular social class
- Membership of a higher class may lead to greater influence within workplace, organisations and society as a whole
- Many people still see the UK as sharply divided by class divisions and inequalities,
- But it does not necessarily follow that people will have a strongly developed sense of class identity
- May depend on personal history, family background, occupation, personal experiences

Marxist theory of class

- Marx's theory of class saw the key defining features of society as the ways in which goods and wealth are produced
- **Who owns workplaces, the raw materials and who works for these owners**
- The organisation and ownership of the means of production - the tools, machines and workplaces, raw materials
- Shape the social relationships between individuals and groups within societies
- So there is a capital owning class and a property less class in this viewpoint
- Or the Bourgeoisie and proletariat
- He also highlights an awareness of a shared class position and also of the existence of other classes with opposing class interests

Weber and class

Weber drew attention to other forms of stratification (or classification) apart from class)

- He talks about associations that bring people together based on common backgrounds, aims or interests and often in pursuit of particular policies
- He does recognise social classes but the starting point is individuals

- Class, refers to identifiable groups of individuals that have certain interests in common, specifically the interests for earning income through particular work or a trade
- those in the higher classes enjoy better life chances than those in lower social classes
- Life chances refer to the opportunities for education, health, housing, employment, levels of income
- But actually this viewpoint also highlights that there are sub divisions of classes
- And focuses also on the amount of prestige, honour and social standing that society attaches to different social groups

Erik Olin Wright and Class

- American sociologist who suggests there are three dimensions of control over economic resources
 - **Control over investments or Money/capital**
 - **Control over the Physical means of production (land, factories, offices)**
 - **Control over Labour power**
- In-between these two classes – the working class and the capitalist class are groups with more ambiguous positions
- The managers and workers in contradictory class locations
- They can influence some aspects of production but not others
- Those in this group are exploiters and exploited

Does class still exist

- It has been suggested that the old certainties of class have been eroded
- Particularly as there has been a move from collective to individual identities
- And a move from occupation to consumption patterns as sources of social distinction
- So one view is that we now live in a classless society with other sources of identity becoming more important
- And instead individual identities are structured around lifestyle choices such as dress, food and leisure
- **New social classes**
- Based on capital, particularly economic, social and cultural capital
- Economic capital is the amount of wealth, income and savings someone has
- Social capital are the networks and people you know, organisations that you belong to which may improve life chances
- Cultural capital includes the cultural interests and activities someone engages in - which again could lead to improved life chances and may also increase social capital.
- **Smaller working class**
- Some people identify positively with working class, whilst others reject the term as stigmatising and patronising

- It has been argued that work plays a smaller role in the sense of identity for working classes
- Individual life chances are still linked to advantages/disadvantages based on class
- And there is still evidence of class and class associations
- Much of the wealth and income is in the hands of the few
- The middle classes encompasses most of the population in the UK
- **Underclass – bottom of the class structure**
- Members of the underclass have living standards that are significantly lower than the majority of people in society and are characterised by multiple disadvantages
- Many are among the long term unemployed or homeless.
- The underclass are often described as marginalised or excluded from the way of life that is maintained by the bulk of the population

Consumption and class

- consumption and lifestyle, from one viewpoint, cuts across old class lines
- However, social class is still seen as a powerful influence on income, consumption and identities.
- So our current age is one of symbols and markers related to consumption
- Where how to dress, what to eat, where to relax are markers of identity
- Bourdieu explores the ways in which people express their identity through consumption
- And how consumption establishes and expresses social difference
- Bourdieu suggests that class differences can become intensified through variations in lifestyles and taste

- **Representations often reflect class prejudices**
- When thinking about the media, we seek to analyse how underlying material or economic conflicts between and within social classes are expressed or reproduced in cultural representations.
- **Middle class authority figures – experts called on to give opinions**
- **Underclass and working class – demeaning representations**
- There is a persistent pattern of under representation of working class occupations
- And an over representation of professional and managerial occupations on television
- Also, some of the working class representations may be quite negative
- It has been suggested that programmes are produced which tend to maintain the status quo
- Where working classes are portrayed as required supervision
- And managers and professionals are portrayed as intelligent and mature
- Programmes then generally tend to normalise stereotypes