The middle class

KEY FOCUS

The middle class is the largest class, but this is partly because it is a rather imprecise term that covers lots of people in very different situations. This section looks at who belongs to the middle class and how it has grown.

The largest class

Marx, writing more than a hundred years ago, expected the middle class of his day to disappear as conflict between the bourgeoisie and proletariat increased. In fact, the middle class seems to be bigger than ever. On the Registrar General's Scale, classes 1, 2 and 3 non-manual are middle class, and at the 1991 Census these classes accounted for just over half the population. So the middle class is now bigger than the working class.

The middle class has grown enormously since the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, most jobs were working class; the three middle-class groups on the Registrar General's Scale made up only a quarter of the population.

Why has the middle class grown?

After World War II (1939–45), there was a big growth in the number of people in middle-class occupations in the public sector. There were a lot more teachers, social workers, health workers, civil servants and so on. The newly created jobs were often taken by people from working-class families, so that they moved up the social class ladder.

More recently, the nature of jobs available has changed again. In the 1980s and 1990s, a lot of traditional working-class jobs, such as working in coalmines, steel works and shipyards, declined. New jobs that replaced them were often, though not always, middle class, for example computer programming and some jobs in travel and tourism.

Another reason for the growth of the middle class is that more people were getting higher qualifications, staying on at school and going to university. There were plenty of people qualified to take new middle-class jobs (although some highly qualified people have to settle for jobs below what they are able to do).

Who belongs to the middle class?

The middle class is big and contains people in many different situations and with different life chances – so much so that some sociologists have said we should refer to the middle classes, not just the middle class. Different writers have suggested dividing the middle class in different ways. The one used here is a common and widely accepted division.

The upper middle class

These are the managers and the professionals. Professionals
are people who have specialised knowledge and qualifications that are gained only after a long period of training. They include lawyers, architects, lecturers, teachers, social workers, doctors and nurses. Managers are less likely to have qualifications related to their job; their class situation depends much more on the position they have in an organisation.

The lower middle class

This includes occupations such as clerks, office workers, telephone sales and shop workers. These kinds of jobs count as middle class because they are non-manual, but the distinction between manual and non-manual work is less important than it used to be. Some of these jobs used to be seen as much more important, and more skilled, than they are now. Being a clerk was once a highly thought of job. We can see this still in titles like ‘town clerk’ for the person responsible for local authority administration, but clerk today tends to imply routine office work such as filing.

Lower middle-class jobs today are often not very well paid and do not require high qualifications. In some ways, however, they are still different from working-class jobs. Working conditions are usually cleaner and safer (compare an office to a factory) and there may be more opportunities to get promotion or to go on training courses. Women hold a high proportion of lower middle-class jobs.

The petty bourgeoisie

These are the owners of small businesses (the ‘petty’ is from the French petit, meaning small, while you already know the term bourgeoisie). They may own a shop or workshop employing a small number of people, or be self-employed as a plumber, electrician and so on, or be a landlord or small farmer. Marx expected this group to disappear, to be swallowed up by one of the two bigger classes, but this has not happened. Although running a small business is very risky, more people are always willing to have a go. They are attracted by the idea of working for themselves rather than for a boss, and there is usually help available to get started. Most small businesses last less than two years; only 20 per cent of those set up in any one year survive for five years.

The divided middle class

The people at the top of the middle class, such as professors and doctors, have a lot in common with the upper class. However, other members of the upper middle class, such as teachers and nurses, are not as well paid and have lower status. Those in the lower middle class earn little, if any, more than the working class and have a lot in common with them. The middle class is clearly divided and it doesn’t make a lot of sense to treat, say, a top consultant in a hospital and a hotel receptionist as being in the same class. Perhaps then it is better to think of there being several middle classes, rather than one middle class.

Higher up the middle class, people enjoy many advantages in life chances: decent salaries, good health and education and long lives. Towards the bottom, life chances are similar to those of the working class.

QUESTIONS
1. Which classes on the Registrar General’s Scale are middle class?
2. Why did Marx expect the middle class to disappear? (You may need to look back at the section on Marx and Weber on class on pages 64–5.)
3. List the three main groups within the middle class, and give three examples of jobs within each group.
4. Why have the number and proportion of middle-class jobs grown in the last 50 years or so?
5. Is there one middle class – or is it better to talk about several middle classes? Give reasons for your answer.

ROUND-UP

The middle class contains at least three groups with different levels of income and status. The middle class has grown considerably as a result of changes in the economy and the expansion of education.

VOCABULARY

Consultant: a doctor holding the highest position in a branch of medicine in a hospital
Professional: someone who is expert and qualified in a responsible job
The working class

The working class has a special place in Marxist accounts of class, because it was the working class that was supposed to unite and overthrow capitalism. This has not happened, and the working class has in fact got smaller. However, it remains distinct from the middle class.

Many traditional working-class jobs have been lost.

Working class or lower class?

Americans tend to use the term 'lower class' rather than working class, but in Britain lower class is seen as being rather negative. Working class, on the other hand, is something a person can be proud of, to be working to earn a living and support a family. Working class will be the term used here.

The working class

Like the middle class, the working class contains several different groups. On the Registrar General's Scale, classes 3 manual, 4 and 5 are working class. These are, respectively, the skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

The number of people in the working class has fallen over the last hundred years or so, at the same time as the number of people in middle-class occupations has grown. The biggest fall has been in unskilled manual work: there are far fewer jobs than in the past for which no skills or training are needed. But, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, many traditional working-class jobs in industries such as shipbuilding, coalmining and heavy industry were lost as the economy changed and as a result of government policies.

The impact of these changes on working-class communities is shown in films like The Full Monty and Brassed Off. The men made unemployed struggle to find a purpose to their lives and hope for the future as their families and communities fall apart.

The communities affected – even destroyed – by these changes had been united by a powerful sense of identity. The work was difficult, but the men took pride in this. There were powerful local loyalties, to football clubs, trade unions, even brass bands and choirs. Society was seen very much in terms of 'us' and 'them' – the workers and the bosses. For Marxists, these powerful loyalties, spread through the rest of the working class, would be the basis for a better future. The working class was seen as the proletariat, the victim of capitalism who would one day rise up and overthrow it. The defeat of the miners' strike of 1984–85 is often seen as the ending of this way of life and these hopes.

Embougeoisement

Living standards for everyone have risen in the last century. For example, life expectancy – how long people live – has grown enormously. The working class today is better off than in the past. Most have secure incomes, own televisions, washing machines, cars, even houses. Does this mean that there are no real differences between the working class and the middle classes? Are we all middle class now? The idea that such differences have disappeared is called embougeoisement.

The evidence for this is not only the higher incomes and ownership of consumer durables, but also in how the classes vote. Traditionally, the Conservative Party has been seen as the party of the middle and upper class, and the Labour Party as the party of the working class. The improvement in working-class living standards – affluence – should have meant that more working-class people voted Conservative. This did happen. In both the 1950s to early 1960s (when the Conservatives won three general elections in a row) and again from 1979 to 1992 (when they won four in a row). It was thought in both periods that Labour could never win again, because it had lost its traditional voters. Affluent workers had, it was said, rejected the old working-class ways and were
behaving like the middle class, less involved in their communities and more interested in being consumers.

In fact, Labour won its biggest ever victory in 1997, attracting many middle-class voters as well as working-class ones. When sociologists looked more closely at the affluent working class, they found that in other ways they still behaved like the working class. They did not mix with the middle class, and were willing to strike when they had a grievance. They had little loyalty to the company and did not expect job satisfaction. This seems to prove that, although workers had changed, embourgeoisement has not happened.

Here are some other ways in which working-class jobs remain different from middle-class ones:

■ The working environment is less likely to be clean and safe.
■ The work is more physically demanding and even dangerous.
■ The work is less likely to require qualifications such as exam passes.
■ There are fewer benefits (such as pension schemes, perks like company cars).

The working class has had to change, and is smaller than it used to be, but it has not disappeared.

Has embourgeoisement happened?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers earned wages nearly as high as the middle class</td>
<td>Workers continued to have different attitudes to work, such as little loyalty to the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They wanted to buy consumer durables</td>
<td>Still differences between working- and middle-class jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some voted Conservative</td>
<td>Affluent workers voted Labour again in 1997</td>
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</tbody>
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to as the underclass, a term which means people at the very bottom of society but not fully a part of society.

FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF

Find a video of the film The Full Monty and watch it. Make a list of the ways in which it shows the impact of changes on working-class communities, on gender roles and on other themes you have studied in sociology.

QUESTIONS

1. Which classes in the Registrar General’s Scale are working class?
2. Which three groups make up the working class? Give an example of an occupation for each group.
3. What is meant by embourgeoisement?
4. What was the significance of the 1984–85 miners’ strike for ideas about the working class?
5. Are we all middle class now? Explain your answer.

ROUND-UP

The working class is smaller than it used to be, and like the middle class can be divided into several different groups. The theory that the higher paid members of the working class have become like the middle class is called embourgeoisement; there is evidence on both sides.

VOCABULARY

Consumer durables: goods you can buy which have a long useful life, such as a car or television
Affluent workers: members of the working class earning high wages
Chronically ill: continuously ill for a long time or permanently; different from acutely ill, which means very ill but for a limited time