

Class: Power, Privilege, and Influence in the United States

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Perhaps the most elusive of all the social ills confronting us today is the issue of class. It can evade any attempt at categorization or simplistic definition. The issues and problems of class struggle cuts across the social dimensions of race and ethnicity, gender, national and geographic origins, educational background, and even marriage and parental status. Thus, the class issue cannot be merely defined in terms of economic power or social influence.

Class may be correctly referred to as the status an individual or group achieves by virtue of its economic strength, the influence among other groups, and the power to affect change in its community of choice. The problems and issues surrounding class have several dimensions. They are:

1. The hierarchy of “Haves” (the dominant group) and “Have Nots” (the subordinated groups)
2. The systematic oppression of subordinated groups to advantage and strengthen the dominant group
3. The promise, myth, and dogma of individualism in American society

This discussion of class will look at the history and definition of classism followed by some suggestions for change by both the dominant and subordinated groups.

History of the Class Struggle

Human beings have participated in struggles between the classes throughout history. Class is a culturally installed way of maintaining the status quo between “the Haves” and “the Have-Nots.” Looking only as far back as the 1600s, we find that class was a function of a rigid caste system based on genealogy or “blood.” If you were born into royalty, then the royal class extends throughout your lineage in perpetuity (or until your family was over thrown in a peasant revolt or invading forces). Conversely, if you were born outside of royalty or to the peasant class, your entire lineage was relegated to that status.

This class issue plays out in terms of religion as well. The pilgrims came to the new world in search of a place to be free of the religious (class) persecution they experienced in the old world. It did not take long before the artifacts of the culturally-installed class oppression began to show up in the new world. The new comers saw themselves as being superior to the indigenous people they found here, and the cycle of oppression was repeated by those who were formally oppressed.

The subordination of classes intersects with race and gender in American history. Women and people of color have been subjected to systematic subordination. Women were legally the property of men clear into the 20th century. The subordination of people of color included genocide and slavery. Even today, the subordination of people of color occurs in the guise of the welfare state. In the contemporary setting, most common expressions of the class struggle can be found in the various discussions about the appropriateness of Title IX athletic rules and the continuation of Affirmative Action in higher education.

Classism Defined

The criteria for determining class membership or identity can be easily debated. Class has been variously defined by origins, workforce status, income, and educational background. The primary emphasis is on the economics of class. Some consider all who derive their income from wages as members of the working class; others exclude professionals and managers whose incomes are high enough to provide a stake in the capitalist system. Depending on the breadth of the definition, 70-85% of the population can be considered working class. This is true despite the fact that the individuals may identify themselves as members of the middle class.

Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated groups (people without endowed or acquired economic power, social influence, and privilege) who work for wages for the dominant group (those who have access to control of the necessary resources by which other people make their living). Classism is held in place by a system of beliefs that ranks people according to economic status, family lineage, job, and level of education. Classism says that dominant group members are smarter and more articulate than working class subordinated groups. In this way, dominant group members (upper-middle class and wealthy people) define for everyone else what is “normal” or “acceptable” in the class hierarchy.

Class affects people not only on an economic level, but also on an emotional level. “Classist” attitudes have caused great pain by dividing subordinated group members from one another and suppressing individual means for personal fulfillment or survival. It is not unusual to find a level of collusion between subordinated group members and dominant group members as a means of survival by gaining access to some of the privilege retained by the dominant group. There is also a fair amount of internalized oppression experienced by some subordinated group members, i.e., a disdain or shame about traditional patterns of class in ones family and a denial of heritage.

What Dominant Groups Can Do About Classism

A major feature of the “classist” mindset is the stereotype that suggests that poor and working class people are unintelligent, inarticulate, and “overly emotional.” A good ally (a dominant group member willing to partner to eliminate classism) will contradict these messages by soliciting the knowledge and histories of impoverished and working class people (members of the subordinated groups). Dominant group allies can also engage subordinated group members by being a thoughtful, considerate listener. When subordinated group members talk about their experiences, it is most helpful for an ally to resist becoming defensive and expressing their own guilt. It is also extremely helpful for dominant group members to refrain from criticizing how the message is being presented. Some ways of becoming an ally include:

- Claim your identity. Learn all you can about your history as a dominant group member.
- Learn the history and experience of all working and impoverished people (particularly people living in your neighborhood or community).
- Raise your children to be anti-classist rather than merely being non-classist in their own behavior. This means becoming active allies with subordinated group members to improve the quality of life for all.
- Give yourself and your children exposure and experience of the language and culture of working peoples.
- Listen with compassion when a member of the subordinated group relays experiences and feelings. Ask for clarification when needed and respond.

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“We need to overcome divisions among working people, not by ignoring the multiple oppressions many of us encounter or by oppressing each other, but by becoming committed allies on all issues that affect working people, including racism, sexism, classism, etc. An injury to one is an injury to all”. - Indra Lahiri

What Subordinated Group Members Can Do About Classism

For some subordinated group members, distrust, despair, and anger are common responses to the oppression they experience. (It is the test of a true ally to remain undeterred when these flare up and to refrain from withdrawing support at such points). When subordinated group members begin to believe the stereotypical views and bias of the dominant group about themselves, it “internalizes” the oppression. To begin to undo the damage caused by classism, it is useful for subordinated group members to:

- Examine their feelings about money in terms savings, earning, and credit.
- Examine their feelings about the ways you relate to material gain and consumerism.
- Examine their feelings about education, its role in developing identity, self-efficacy, and the capacity to partner across the various dimensions of difference.
- Examine your feelings and ideas about culturally-installed privilege, power, and influence of various groups and the struggle for significance.
- Claim their identity. Learn all they can about their history and the history and experience of all working and poor peoples. Raise their children to be anti-classist rather than merely being non-classist in their own behavior.
- Work on issues that will benefit their communities. Consider remaining in or returning to their communities. (If you live and work in dominant group environments, look for working-class allies to help you survive with your humor and wits intact.)

The recognition of classism by the dominant and subordinated groups is the first step for creating change. Working together, all people can help to make progress towards a class-free society.

Suggested Reading

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