

Our Class Society

ECONOMIC DIVISIONS DEFINE OUR WAY OF LIVING

One of the few useful insights I got from college sociology is that societies are complex organisms with their own history and internal dynamics, not simply collections of individuals. Societies shape the lives of the individuals within them.

The U.S. is a migrant society, settled by ambitious risk-takers, producing a highly individualistic culture that tends to see everything as personal rather than social. That has a lot to do with our economic history.

World War II ended in 1945, leaving most of the world's advanced industrial countries devastated but the U.S. intact. Through the 1960s U.S. industry had little international competition, producing boom years with large unions promoting many formerly working-class people into a growing middle class.

In the early 1970s the U.S. economy began a long decline as the other industrial countries recovered and became competitors. Labor unions lost power. With the blessing of both major political parties, manufacturing jobs were exported. "Baby boomers" flooded the labor market.

All of this put economic pressure on the middle class, which tried to preserve its standard of living by putting its wives to work, reducing its savings rate, running up debt and revolting against taxes.

Here is a simple thumbnail sketch of how the classes live today:

The rich might as well be aliens from another planet. They get to choose most of the politicians we're allowed

to vote for, then sell them to us through corporate news media.

Middle-class people live in houses with a reliable car in the driveway, have health insurance and a stable income. They don't get laid off and have to collect unemployment, need food stamps or the Oregon Health Plan (Medicaid). Their main characteristic is security.

Working-class people have no security and spend their lives worrying about money. Subject to frequent and unpredictable layoffs, they need government support like unemployment. They live in apartments and can pay their bills if they're careful, but don't have much extra. They drive old, unreliable cars and probably don't have health insurance unless it's OHP. At times they need food stamps. They're exploited as cheap labor, then discarded when no longer needed. It's a small drop from working class into poverty. All it takes is something going wrong — not being able to find another job after a layoff and the unemployment running out, expensive car repairs, a health crisis, etc.

Poor people live on the edge, often not knowing where next month's rent is coming from or how they're going to pay their bills, feed their children towards the end of the month when the food stamps run out, etc. They live in the cheapest apartments they can find, either don't own cars and use public transportation or drive clunkers they can't afford to fix. They often work part-time at minimum wage. It's a very small drop from poverty into homelessness.

The Occupy movement, which put inequality on the U.S. political agenda, framed it as the 1 percent rich against the rest of us. While that is useful in describing where the money goes — to the top — the real economic division is between the upper and lower 50 percent — the rich and middle class vs. the working class and poor.

As *The Register-Guard* pointed out in a Sept. 21 editorial, "The number of low-income people and those living in poverty now make up a combined 48 percent of the U.S. population."

The stories we tell ourselves serve a personal and social purpose. Thus middle-class conservatives regard the lower classes as lazy, bums, losers, while the liberals see them as damaged. These stories provide a way to ignore the damaging effects of the economic structure created by the politicians they voted for, and the corporations they buy cheap goods from. If everything is personal, the middle class doesn't have to think about its politics or its relatively privileged position.

Exporting jobs may have run its course, but automation will continue to replace workers with ever more intelligent machines. Sasha Abramsky, in her book *The American Way of Poverty*, suggests practical adjustments that could reduce the damage.

In the long run we're going to have to find some way besides jobs to distribute the wealth generated by our growing automated productivity, something like a guaranteed annual income.

But to make any political changes, we have to change the way we think and talk about U.S. economic class.

Lynn Porter has been a local activist for many years. For the last four years he has focused on homelessness, running the local Homeless Action Google group, Facebook page and YouTube channel.

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